スレイヤーズ

11 クリムゾンの妄執

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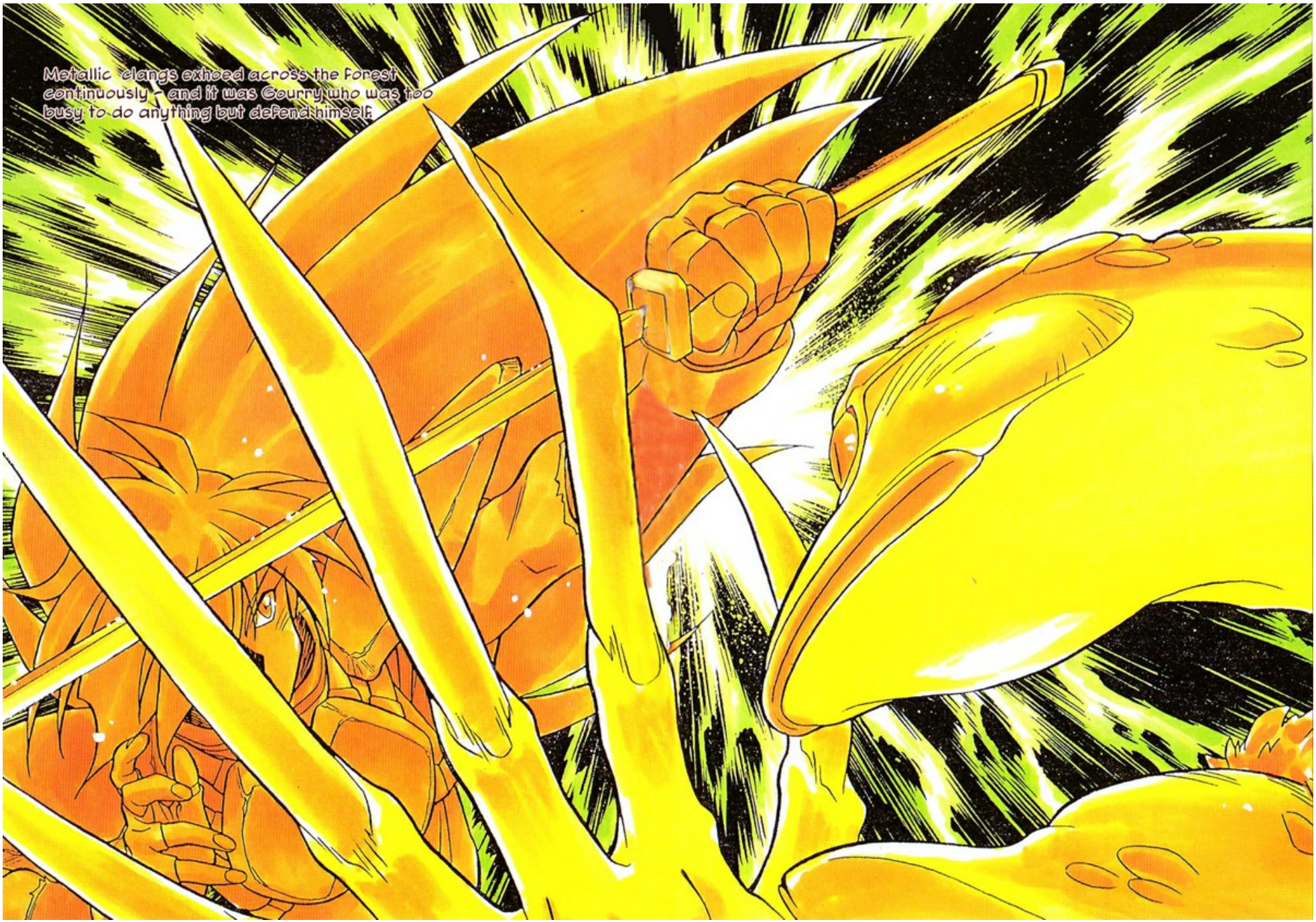
ファンタジア文庫

SLAYERS V11
Crimson Obsession
"Something is indeed afoot..." I murmured silently in front of a pillar at the entrance of a town.


Metallic clangs echoed across the forest continuously - and it was Gourry who was too busy to do anything but defend himself.

However... in my arms Dilar's body already began losing its warmth little by little.
I knew what that meant.
It's like this... when a man dies.

SLAYERS

VOL.11: CRIMSON OBSESSION

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A Rebellion?! The Troubled World

“Hey, if you behave yourself and give us everything you have, that may convince us to leave you in peace.”

“If you don’t…”

It was a great morning, but alas, it was not an explosion from one of my attack spells that made the five or six bandits, who abruptly appeared on the road next to the corpse of a man, fall silent.

Something could be felt around the corpse. Hatred, sorrow, anger, hostility—the presence seemed to emanate all kinds of negative human emotions.

“Wha… What is this…?” Although they were just a bunch of blockheads, when the bandits felt the sudden hostile atmosphere, they gave up on their threats and quickly began to flee.

In the same moment, I started to chant a spell.

“Is it just my imagination?”

“No! Something’s there nearby!” As their yells (or more like panicked screams) reached my ears, the presence seemed to be getting closer.

There was a muffled noise, and then…

“Graaaah!”

“Blast Ash!”

With some fireworks, the brass demon that emerged from the corpse was completely annihilated by my attack before it could make another sound.

“By the way, there seems to be more and more of these nowadays.” Walking on a path within the forest, Gourry, my travelling companion spoke in a peaceful tone while he glanced at the clear sky with a blank look.

This happened a bit later after I dealt with the brass demon and also sent the horribly scared bandits flying, grabbing all of their treasure.

“By ‘these’ you mean the brass demon I just defeated with my spell?” I asked.

“Yeah, those,” Gourry answered, looking over his shoulder. I also turned back, but the spot where we faced the demon could no longer be seen from here.

“You’re right,” I sighed, not bothering to hide the gloomy

feeling that took hold of me. “There’s a lot more of them than there was before…”

Lesser demons and brass demons—they were the lowest-ranking among mazoku, and I took care of them without breaking a sweat, but they still never were the kind of an opponent you simply ignore.

To your everyday warrior or sorcerer, anything that’s called a ‘mazoku’ is a risk to their lives. It’s nothing to someone of my capability, of course, but even such people could be caught unawares by a surprise attack, or if they get overwhelmed by a group of such demons.

Luckily, there were not all too many of them—at least that was the case until recently.

It started around half a year ago. Like Gourry said, these low-level demons began to emerge here and there, causing serious damage to many towns.

We were also attacked by a demon late at night in an inn once. The two of us tried to mount a quick counterattack, but the buildings around us got damaged and we had to waste a lot of money to pay for it. Then there was the case when we went to a bandit hideout to mop the floor with them for the sake of fun and cash, but the hideout had already been destroyed by a wild demon, robbing us of our much anticipated money—and prompting me to blow up part of the mountain with the Dragon Slave. That, however, changed the topography of the land and caused us to be chewed out by the locals, and… Anyway, I could go on and on, but long story short we also had our fair share of these attacks.

The reason why these incidents happened more often—that was yet to be discovered. But still, the anxious thought that ‘something is afoot’ was definitely on people’s minds.

“Something… is indeed afoot…” I murmured silently, having stopped in front of a pillar at the entrance of a town.

It was Telmoord City, located in the corner of Lyzeille; although honestly, the ‘city’ looked more like a big, overgrown village, without any other distinguishing characteristics. If you asked me about it, I could only mention the wall that surrounded the town, but that wasn’t all that unique either.

But putting the town’s characteristics aside…

“What’s up, Lina? Why did you stop here?” Gourry asked with an incredulous look.

“Because of this.” I pointed towards the pillar with my eyes. A piece of paper was attached to the doorpost made of stone.

To all mages on the road!
If you don’t have any other pressing matters to attend to, please visit the Sorcerer’s Guild nearest to you.

The chairman of the Sorcerer’s Guild

“What’s this all about?” Though it was a really simple sentence, Gourry asked anyway, looking clueless like he always did.

Actually, at first glance, all one could understand from the paper was ‘sorcerers, go to the Sorcerer’s Guild’—but the main point was to go to the ‘nearest’ one, not the one in this town. That meant the poster was circulated more widely and not just in Telmoord. It could

be seen by many travelling mages and could gather a lot of interest, but it didn't contain any details. In other words, something important likely happened which they didn't want the general public to know about. Now that I think about it, there was a note similar to this that was posted all around a pretty long time ago…

"Anyway, I need to go there," I said, and started moving again.

"Err… Aren't you Miss… Lina Inverse…?"

We were on the main street of the town when someone addressed me. We've already heard the state of things from the Sorcerer's Guild, took our time finishing lunch in a restaurant close by, and were about to depart to our destination.

"Yes, I think I am," I answered and turned back, and found a girl standing there.

Though I did say a girl, she seemed to be around the same age as me, or a little older. She had short blonde hair and green eyes; it wasn't an overstatement to say that she was good-looking, but the clothes she wore—a black hat and cloak, and also the black mage outfit surrounding her whole body—combined with her 'too much on her mind'-expression took away half of her charm.

"Ahm… I've heard your name just now at the Sorcerer's Guild. You… You are the Lina Inverse who has so many rumors floating about her abroad… right?"

"I don't want to hear about those stories that simply refuse to die —" I began in vain.

"It's hard to tell whether the rumors are trying to praise or insult

you, but—”

“*Yes*, I think I’m exactly that Lina Inverse.” I cut her off squirming. “So?”

I could feel a vein pop on my temple hearing her excessive words, but with extreme willpower I managed to keep my cool.

“I’ve got a favor to ask!” she yelled suddenly. “Please… Take me… Take me with you to Crimson!”

“He—” I grabbed her right arm and pulled her into the alley next to me. “Hey! Don’t shout! You want me to bring you along because you already know what’s happening, right? You know what’s going on in Crimson, don’t you?”

“Yes. Of course I do.” She nodded to my question. We could glimpse hidden depths reflecting in her eyes.

‘The rebellion of a branch of the Sorcerer’s Guild’

That was basically what was going on in the guild of Crimson.

When one of the magicians in the small Laagudo kingdom, who held both the title of a minister and considerable power in the guild as well, staged a revolt, a poster almost the same as this was put out in bigger towns.

At that time, thanks to the remarkable efforts of myself and another person, the king was saved and the matter ended with the minister’s severe punishment, but… this time it was happening in Crimson Town, also located at the outskirts of the Kingdom of Lyzeille.

The leader of this revolt was the chairman of Crimson's Sorcerer's Guild, who took no part in politics. In a ridiculous move, he killed the lord who ruled the place and now dominated the town by force.

Of course, it was said that the news spread to the heart of the nation quickly, and the king sent some troops to intervene. If the army was already on its way, crushing the revolt in Crimson would only be a matter of time. Still, the Sorcerer's Guilds wanted to solve this problem on their own to restore faith in their organization.

That was the story I heard at the guild a little while ago. They requested sorcerers who can help to go to Crimson and give a hand in bringing down the rebellion. However… as there were some false rumors spreading around in places recently, to avoid causing unnecessary confusion, this operation was a secret. A formal announcement would only be made after the issue was dealt with completely—this was the opinion of both the guild and the kingdom.

So, of course, this topic was not the proper one to pursue at the center of the main street. But, as I studied her expression, I thought she might still have her reasons for behaving like that.

"Anyway, let's have a talk…" I said. "So, what's your name?"

"Aria Ashford." The voice that answered was not her own, but the hoarse words of an older man.

I instinctively snapped my head back; there was a shadow standing deeper inside the alley. The person wore a black cloak and hood that was pulled deep below his eyes. He wore nondescript

black clothing, and his face was also unseen in the shadows under the hood.

Although I'm not very tall, he looked even shorter than me as he stood in the alley, as his back was bent forwards.

"Y… You?"

Ignoring the uneasy-looking Aria's question, the old man opened his mouth to speak. "I see… So they are the assassins you chose… to defeat Lord Cairus."

"Who… who are you…?" the girl asked again.

"Please call me Zonagain. Now then, let me see their skills."

Something like a low whistle cut into the air of the shadowy alley.

I didn't know what was going on, but it looked like gramps just declared war on us. I began to cast a spell in a murmur, while Gourry retrieved his sword from his belt.

"What the—?"

Both Gourry and Aria looked shocked: the darkness itself seemed to wriggle. It was a really grotesque sight; around Zonagain the darkness was moving in waves… No! It was not the darkness.

"Eep!" Aria let out a quiet yelp as she realized the truth. A swarm of dozens of rats gathered there, hard to spot in the shadowy place. They weren't there a moment ago; it looked like they appeared in response to the old man's whistle.

So… gramps is a beast master, capable of controlling animals?

Well, regardless of his army of rats, I don't think we have much to worry abou—

A small noise could be heard in the alley, halting my thoughts. It was a sound like something had popped. Gourry, who came to stand next to me, froze on the spot.

More popping sounds hit the air.

"Urgh…" As the noise got louder, I could hear Aria letting out a small groan.

The sound seem to be coming from near Zonagain. The rat swarm… wait, can I still call them that? They might have been animals right before, but now took on really bizarre forms in front of our eyes. Bones and skin burst apart—new skin and bones came into being.

They were now bigger than what I could hold in my hand, and were continuously growing more and more. Honestly, I was a bit curious about what they'd become—but it was certainly no time for sightseeing. So…

"Freeze Arrow!" I changed the target of my spell, which I chanted to use against Zonagain, to hit the transforming rats instead!

The dozens of icy arrows from my hand froze all of them right away—but right after they hit, the ice vanished with the sound of a gust of wind.

"Ungh…!" I unwittingly let out a loud groan. I knew which race could make something like this happen.

Mazoku.

The answer to what these creatures were suddenly became clear to me.

"Ha-ha… What do you think? This is a rare sight to see, isn't it?" Surrounded by the lesser demons that became of the rats, Zonagain flashed a lazy smile.

Boom-boom-boom!

The sudden explosion was accompanied by a burst of flame—and followed shortly by the screams of people.

The Flare Arrows the lesser demons released hit the main street as we cleared out of the alley and moved to the side to avoid them. Fortunately, it looked like there weren't any people injured, as traffic was low at that time of the day.

"Everyone, run away from here!" I shouted while the lesser demons poured out from the alley.

Some of the passerbys screamed again, as the few people there scattered quickly.

Good. This place has room, we can fight well here.

"Gourry! Some cover, please!" I said and began to chant a spell.

"Okay!" Gripping his sword, Gourry dashed toward the horde of lesser demons!

"Goooooh!" One of the demons took notice of him, let out a loud cry and created dozens of Flare Arrows in front of its body!

But before it could fire, Gourry ran up to it, and his sword cleaved the demon's stomach.

“Kwaaaah!” the lesser demon screamed in its death throes and fell down, the flaming arrows in front of it quickly scattering in the air.

One down!

“Awesome!” Aria exclaimed beside me, seeing Gourry’s swordplay.

But it was too early to celebrate; a lot of lesser demons remained still. They’d all come out to the main street from the alley by then. Gourry’s blade felled a second demon—and by the time he was finished with a third, my spell was complete!

“Blam Blazer!”

The blue light of the spell can penetrate its target and give a living man something of a shock; mazoku and undead on the other hand, would feel considerable pain. Still, normally the damage would not be very great; right now though, I had boosted the spell with the talismans!

My azure beam went through several of the demons that came out of the alley

“Kheeeeck!” With a scream, the demons collapsed on the spot.

Until then, all the demons concentrated only on Gourry, but now I’ve become their target as well.

“Aria! Get away from here!” I shouted, pulling out the short sword from my belt; then I ran forward chanting a spell.

“Graaah!” a lesser demon roared, blocking my way. At that

moment, Flare Arrows appeared out of thin air and began to pour towards me.

I avoided them by jumping to the side, and released the spell I've been casting.

"Elmekia Lance!" Seeing that my spell nailed the demon perfectly, I began to chant the next one.

The lesser demons weren't all that weak, but had no idea whatsoever about teamwork. Moreover, while they had a high magical capacity, their apparent low intelligence made their attack patterns very easy to predict. Me and Gourry couldn't lower our guard around such enemies, but I could also say that they weren't really fearsome as long as we paid attention.

Long story short…

"Blast Ash!"

It wasn't long until the last lesser demon vanished in a flash, courtesy of my spell.

Now the only one remaining is that man called Zonagain…

"Oh, you erased so many lesser demons in such a short time. You're doing pretty well!" The voice came from above.

I glanced up and saw a small shadow on the roof of the building.

Did he float up there using a spell like Levitation while we were fighting?

"Don't just savor the view there, come down!" I yelled. "Didn't you say that you wanted to see our skills? The lesser demons weren't

enough against us, isn't it time for you to step in? Or do you want to stay up there because you're scared?"

"No, I just love high places. As the old saying that goes, 'smoke likes to climb to high'." He easily brushed my provocation aside in a facetious tone.

Hmm. All those years must've brought him some wisdom.

While I kept my eyes on gramps, Gourry stepped a forward.

"Then should we go up first?" he asked.

"No, we can't," I shot him down in a firm voice, my eyes not leaving the old man.

Gourry might not have thought much about our enemy, but my opinion was a bit different.

Low-ranking mazoku like lesser demons and brass demons are created from small animals which lack ego; they are transformed to provide a form to these beings as they possess them from the Astral Plane. The ability Zonagain used before was pretty huge: he could gather rats and summon souls of mazoku from the Astral Plane at the same time, very quickly creating some lesser demons. Even a pretty skillful summoner could call forth no more than ten such beings at once; considering this, you could tell just how incredibly skilled and powerful Zonagain had to be.

Using flying magic was easy, but we still couldn't move freely while floating in the air. If Zonagain had any other special skills aside of summoning, he'd never miss such a chance and would attack us right away.

So, I tried provoking our opponent to come down, but it looked like he saw through that already.

Then…

"What's wrong?" Zonagain asked mockingly. "Won't you come up—?"

"We won't," I declared, cutting him short.

"Hmm… So you won't. That feels really pointless. But still, it doesn't bother me very much." His voice was still relaxed. "However… Won't *you* be in trouble then? I could change all rats, dogs and cats in this town into demons if I really wanted."

"Heh. If you want to, go ahead. I don't care one bit," I said lightly. For the first time, Zonagain's expression started to become agitated.

"Uhm… Do you think I was just boasting? Or do you believe you can get to me regardless of whether thousands of lesser demons stood in your way?"

"Sorry, but it's neither." I extended one finger and said, "If you try something like that here, we'll ignore it and leave this town as quickly as possible."

"What?!" Gourry, Aria and even Zonagain sounded shocked.

"W… Wait! What are you saying…?!"

I ignored the old man's shouting from above, and turned around.

"Hey, Gourry, Aria. Let's get out of this town right now. While the old geezer is busy posing on the roof alone, we'll go to Crimson

and defeat that what's-his-name chairman."

With that, I started walking off.

"Hey! Wait! If you don't stop, I'll… I'll destroy this town!"

"Is the gramps saying something?" I wondered. "Let's just leave him alone. It's normal for people to get more chatty as they age."

"Are you serious…?" Gourry stuttered.

"But… he said he'll destroy the town…"

"Never mind that, Aria. Those are just words," I said without turning back.

Of course, I didn't just say that without thinking. My remark was based on reason.

As he easily deflected my provocative words, Zonagain did not seem the type to quickly lose his temper and lash back. And as he said in the beginning, he wanted to see our skills. This man's purpose was to investigate our power. Even if we showed our backs to him, I was sure he would not simply destroy the town in a fit of rage.

"W… Wait! I said wait! How can you be so irresponsible?! Kids these days…!"

The three of us completely ignored the old man's mutterings on the roof and left the place.

"Well, let's hear it, shall we? What is your problem, Aria?"

"Ahm… It's great that we talk about my problem, but… why do

we have to discuss it in a place like this?" Following my lead, Aria spoke in a low voice, like I just did.

Little time had passed since we left Telmoord. We turned off the road and entered a not so big forest close to town. By the time I stopped and asked Aria, we were already pretty deep inside it.

"Isn't it obvious?" I answered. "We can guess what that old Zonagain guy will do; once he got down from the roof, he would likely follow after us. If he did, he would surely find the road toward Crimson, so if we just go down there without thinking, it would be only a matter of time until we'd be found. But we still want to go to Crimson, right? So my plan is to hide in a neighborhood like this while gramps passes by us, and after hearing your story, go towards our destination at a slow pace."

With that, I sat down on the grass using my cloak as a mat.

"Ah… I see." Aria nodded.

"But Lina… what if gramps doesn't chase after us? Isn't this just a waste of time then?" Gourry suggested his contrary opinion.

“Then let me ask this, Gourry. Since we’re just wasting time here, is it okay by you to get attacked by countless lesser demons the old man sends after us if we go to Crimson right now?”

“W-Well… That is…”

“That sounds pretty horrible, right?” I shot him down. “Well, explain then, Aria. Why do you have to go to Crimson? And why is Zonagain is chasing you?”

Like me, she sat down, using her cloak as a mat too. She gazed downwards for a while, as if reflecting on some serious topic, but after that, she lifted her face and said in a firm tone…

“I have to help my sister.”

Aria said her sister’s name was Bell.

As a kind and beautiful woman, Aria was very proud of her.

After a while, Bell finally found a fiancé and they were going to have a happy wedding together. If this was a fairy tale, now would be the time to cheerfully say ‘and the two married and lived happily ever after’—but reality seemed more complicated than that.

Cairus, who was the chairman of the Sorcerer’s Guild and lived alone, fell in love with Bell at first sight and tried to seduce her.

Though Cairus was good at politics and was respected both at managing the guild and also as a mage, he was less spectacular as a human being. He’d married once already, but his wife ran away; other sorcerers valued him, but otherwise his reputation was low. And to top it all off, Bell was only 19 years old, while Cairus was over 40. Considering this, it was impossible for Bell to have any

good feelings about him.

But Cairus hung around her and kept trying regardless. Bell refused him, saying that she already had a fiancé, but… not much later, her fiancé died in a suspicious accident. The locals whispered and gossiped among themselves, saying that Cairus killed him, disguising his death as an accident to win Bell's hand. Of course, no one was able to find out whether the rumor was true—but as events progressed, Bell became more and more unhappy.

At least that's what everyone thought. However…

"Several days after that, my sister married Cairus…" said Aria, lowering her head. Looking reluctant to talk about this part of her tale, she continued her story with gaps of silence. "I asked why… but she didn't give an answer to me… her face looked embarrassed… After that I couldn't meet my sister much… but from the rumors I've heard, she never seemed to be happy…"

Seemed to be.

I let out a quiet murmur, listening to the story silently.

I don't know what Bell thought when she married Cairus. I can't push aside the possibility that she did find him attractive somehow, and made a rash decision… but from what I could make out of this tale, Cairus seemed like a man who only wants to conquer, and once he gets what he wants, he quickly loses interest. Regardless of what her motive was for marriage, it was impossible to live a happy life with such a man.

"I was researching a few things in Crimson's guild…" Aria

continued. “One day, when I was about to go there, a messenger told me that my sister was calling for me. And then I’ve heard from her…”

“That Cairus was about to break out a revolt?”

She nodded to my question. “She said that Cairus could soon drag all the people of the guild into it. So she told me to run away and tell this to the other towns’ guilds… Sairaag was the nearest one from Crimson, but… that city was destroyed by an unknown force two years ago…”

“Uh…!” Both Gourry and I let out an unwitting groan.

“What is it?” she asked.

“N-No. It’s nothing.”

The truth was that me and Gourry were very heavily involved in Sairaag’s destruction…

Umm… Come to think of it, I never officially reported to the Sorcerer’s Guild about what happened there…

Well, I’ll do that later.

“So the next nearest town to Crimson was Telmoord?” Putting our affairs aside, I pushed Aria’s story forward.

“Yes… There might’ve been another town with a guild that was closer… but this was the only city which surely had one, and which I could find the way to.”

“I see…”

Right, if she got lost on the way to a town she's never been to or there wasn't any guild in the town when she finally arrived, that would have been an epic failure beyond words.

"But… it turned out that before I could get to this city and relay the information… Cairus already made his move. The day after I arrived and reported what was happening to the guild… I learned that Cairus started the revolt by killing the lord, and the king's army was on its way…" She sighed faintly. "It's said that the town is completely under Cairus' control. I don't know how much power he has… but if the king's army is involved, Crimson *will* be captured sooner or later. But if that's how it will go, then my sister will surely be caught in the middle…"

"True… So you want to save your sister before the army gets there?" I asked.

"Yes. I'll do it on my own if I can, of course… I know how to use attack magic a little… just not very well. I also had no fighting experience until now, so…"

In truth, while we were battling with the lesser demons earlier, she just stood there trembling, without a clue about what to do. To fight well, you need some experience, boldness and determination—but it looked like Aria lacked all of the above.

"So you waited for people who were able to escort you to Crimson… until we came along?"

"I know it's an impudent request. I also know I'll be in your way, and regardless of whether I go there or not, I won't be able to make a difference, but…" She trailed off.

“But you still want to help your sister, right?” Aria nodded to my words silently.

Um… Okay.

I also have a sister in my hometown, but I’m sure as hell she’s much, much stronger than me. She’s the kind of person who can get through anything, no matter how hard or huge the problem is.

So, to be honest, I never really understood this ‘the troubled heart of a worrying sister’-thing, but…

“Well… actually…” I spoke while scratching the back of my head. “After hearing all of this, I want to defeat this Cairus guy by my own hands anyhow. But…”

“But?” Aria asked, looking uneasy.

I sent a wink her way. “I don’t know the man’s face. So someone has to show me who he is.”

“Then…?”

“Let’s go! To Crimson!”

“Thank you, Miss Lina!” she exclaimed.

“Just call me Lina. We’ll wait a little longer, and then go on our way.”

“Okay!” Aria said with a bright smile.

But does she know? Does she know why Zonagain omitted the real reason he was after her?

Cairus already knew that Aria left Crimson. Perhaps he didn’t

know she was in Telmoord—although Zonagain did turn up here. Of course, it's still possible that Cairus sent his men far and wide to look for her, but the strange thing is that Zonagain's orders were not about catching or killing Aria, but to investigate the skill of the sorcerer she chose—in other words, us.

In fact, when we fought the lesser demons in the town, they did not even look at Aria when she backed away.

It's seems there's more to this story than meets the eye.

At first, our journey went better than I expected.

After asking around in places we went through, it looked like Zonagain was indeed ahead of us like I thought. I wanted to laugh myself silly with glee, but the fact remained that we couldn't postpone our fight with him forever if we wanted to finish this. We could also count on facing a lot more enemies in Crimson, where our adversaries were the strongest.

There were other minor factors at play as well. After we've left Telmoord, thanks to some coin, I found out that the vanguard of the king's army, roughly 200 men, had passed by us already. I didn't think they would attack Crimson with only these soldiers, but there wasn't any more time to relax for sure.

And also…

"I guessed we can't just keep travelling like this for long," Gourry said and came to a halt on the forest path. We've been on the road for 4 days already.

"Yes?" Aria stopped as well, staring at Gourry in confusion.

“In other words, we have guests,” he said. “It seems you’re pretty bad at hiding your presence.”

“That’s because I’m not used to this line of work.” The voice coming from the forest belonged to the person I’ve been expecting to meet. Not touching the overgrown shrubbery at all, the form of a man rose from within the shadows of the trees, his clothing the same as what he wore when we met him in Telmoord.

“Hi! We’ve put one over you, Mr. Zonagain,” I greeted him. “We’ve been resting in the forest after leaving Telmoord, but it seems you passed by us without noticing anything.”

“Well, just meeting you like this is enough for me.” Again, he thwarted my attempt at psychological warfare easily.

Yep, this man is no idiot.

This also showed in why he chose such a place for an ambush. At the edge of the forest, there were plenty of places to hide not to mention strike unexpectedly, but more than that, the scenery was also to Zonagain advantage specifically: The bushy forest was the heart of Mother Nature. Naturally, there would be plenty of small animals nearby to be used as material for creating lesser demons.

But this place and setup wasn’t to my disadvantage either.

“So, you’re going to call some lesser demons again, because you have no confidence in your own power?” I tried provoking him again.

I hoped that Zonagain would ignore me once more and would try summoning the demons anyhow. Then I could use the time it takes

to blast him with something big!

His words, however, ruined my plan straight away. “No, no. Sorry that I can’t play along with your plan, but not this time. From the fight in town I learned that such lesser demons are nothing but an annoyance to you. I still wouldn’t care either way, but… my colleague advised me not to complicate our fight by letting these demons loose.”

“Colleague?” I asked him, my eyes narrowing.

“Yes. Let me introduce him,” Zonagain replied. “Hey, stop hiding and come out already, Graimore.”

A chill ran down my spine.

What?

We quickly snapped our heads back, but there was nothing there but leaf-covered trees like before… No, within the shadow of the leaves, I could see something moving.

With a silent step, our second opponent left the tree shades to show its appearance under the midday sun.

“A lizard man?” Aria blurted out unwittingly.

No kidding; the guy had leaf green scales covering his whole body along with a really long tail, and he looked like a lizard in all other respects too. Still, while this Graimore might have seemed like a lizard man, he surely was no ordinary reptile if Zonagain thought that he’s worth more than the lesser demons he could summon in spades.

Not to mention that lizard-guy could hide behind us without exposing his presence at all.

"Well, Graimore… Which one of them do you want to fight?"

"The swordsman," he answered to Zonagain's question in a serene tone.

No sooner than he said that… Graimore's nails grew long. There were ten in total, with varying lengths: the longest one had the size of a long sword, while the shortest one was similar to a dagger.

Is this the guy's weapon?

I slowly turned back towards Zonagain.

"Very well. Then you will be *my* opponent," he said.

"It seems so," I replied. "By the way, isn't it bad manners not to show your face while talking to people?"

"Ah, I'll reveal myself then." Having said that, Zonagain calmly lifted the hood from his head without any qualms.

"Eh?" A low sound escaped my mouth as I saw him. "You have a… pretty normal face."

"Did you think I would not have the face of a human?" No longer hidden by the hood, the old man with a gray beard gave a wry smile.

Gramps was pretty handsome when he was young, wasn't he?

"Well, I did expect something like that, yeah…" I admitted.

"I'm sorry I could not live up to your expectations then," he said.

“Well, I actually didn’t come here to live up to them, anyway.”

“I guess not.”

“Then it seems we’re through with conversation. Shall we get started?

“All right.” With that, I retrieved the short sword from my belt and charged at Zonagain, chanting a spell. At the same time, Zonagain was backing away to maintain the distance between us—but I had no intention to continue this cat-and-mouse game!

“Freeze Arrow!”

I released my completed spell. It could create dozens of icy arrows which weren’t exactly lethal if they hit, but with some luck they could hinder the opponents’ movements and slow them down.

Zonagain effortlessly avoided the rain of freezing arrows by using a tree as a shield.

Hmm. He is acting like I thought he would.

I already knew that it’d be difficult to strike true with a spell like this in a forest which is full of obstacles. I threw this at him expecting a lucky hit at best.

My real plan was to repeat this simple attack with the Freeze Arrows until he would start to believe that I’m the type who just charges forward without thinking, prompting him to catch up with me and try to end things.

Then I’ll use Van Rail—a spell that creates lots of icy threads that advance on the ground and can immobilize the opponent. I’ll

tie him up, and then move in for the kill with the big guns!

For now, as part of the trick I chanted Freeze Arrow again—

"Van Rail." The voice coming from the trees was Zonagain's.

What?!

With the sound of moving ice, threads of freezing cold stretched out from where he was in all directions—including, of course, towards me as well!

Damn! A preemptive attack!

I quickly jumped back, but the icy threads kept stretching and stretching towards me.

Then take this!

I dropped my short sword to the ground. The threads enveloped the blade—using that momentary distraction, I whirled around and left the spot as quickly as possible.

I got out of the forest at the same spot where I went in. There, the fight between Gourry and Graimore was already underway. Metallic clangs echoed across the forest continuously—and it was Gourry who was too busy to do anything but defend himself. It looked to me like he had the advantage in skill, but Graimore's ten nails with their diverse lengths struck at him in an unpredictable way, so he seemed to have his hands full already without mounting an attack. When Gourry tried to gain some distance, Graimore dashed right back at him.

The weapon Gourry was wielding was a magical sword of

considerable power, although I knew nothing about its components. I also thought that someone of his skill could easy cut the nails off, but…

Graimore stepped forward. Something cut across the air with a swish.

The tail!

The lizard man's long tail struck downwards, aiming for Gourry's lower leg!

An instant later, Gourry took a step back—Graimore was in an unstable position because of his attack, and could not follow him this time.

Gourry's sword glinted as it sliced the air—and Graimore's nails flew into the sky, severed.

That's his chance!

But the moment I thought that, Gourry stepped back further to move out of attack distance. And then…

With a swift noise, the lizard man's nails grew back to their original length.

I see. He's really one bothersome opponent.

I wanted to give Gourry a hand with a spell, but it would have been risky as he could've gotten caught in it as well, and also… I don't think Zonagain would've let me.

Speaking of which, there was a presence approaching me from behind.

Good!

"Van Rail!" Without checking who he was, as soon as I turned around, I touched a nearby tree branch and released the spell I chanted while retreating. The threads of ice spread out, freezing the branch, the grass and then the ground itself.

But when I looked up, I could not see Zonagain anywhere—even though I was sure the presence was there.

Where is the guy?

I hurriedly tried to find him.

"Above?" When I glanced up, among the tree rising towards the heavens, there was a shadow floating in the air!

"Freeze Arrow!" This time, it was Zonagain who sent this icy attack towards me!

"Fireball!"

—Boom!

With a loud explosion, a ball of fire crashed into the arrows through the air, the wind spreading its crimson flames!

That spell—did it come from Aria?

The burst of flame began warming up to Zonagain, who got stuck high up there, surrounded by burning leaves.

"Argh!" A yell came from beyond the flames.

All right! Now's my chance!

I chanted an incantation in a hurry. "Blam Blazer!"

I released my completed spell towards the fire; although I could not see Zonagain's form because of the flames, there was no chance that he could escape it. The blue light penetrated the orange haze—but there was no impact.

Did I miss?

"Freeze Arrow!" Zonagain's voice came from a completely different direction!

How could he—?! I instinctively ducked behind a tree.

However… the scream I've heard belonged to none other than Aria.

"Kyaaa!"

Damn it!

When I lifted my head, I found Aria kneeling on the ground nearby. It looked like the Freeze Arrow managed to nail her perfectly; starting from her left shin, her entire lower body was covered in steaming ice.

And then, from her side of the forest, Zonagain stepped forth.

No… How could he move so quickly?

If he used Levitation, it would've haven taken him a lot more time to get there…

"Wasn't it overly violent to use Fireball within a forest?" he said as he slowly approached Aria. The wind carried the distinct sound of a spell chant towards me from his direction.

This is bad! He wants to take out Aria first!

I couldn't leave her in such a situation, but I did not have enough time to chant a spell. I would have tried charging at him—but my sword lay frozen inside the forest.

But then…

"Blam Blazer!"

Suddenly, a shock-wave shining with blue light crossed the air and penetrated Zonagain's body. He fell and rolled on the ground several times, but then stood up as if he was unhurt. Nonetheless, he threw a hateful glare in a certain direction…

"Don't do that, grandpa. A man's duty is to be kind to those who are beautiful."

It was the first time I saw the man; he regarded Zonagain while assuming a roistering pose.

"Tsk!" Zonagain glanced at me and the man in turn. He probably realized that he was at a disadvantage, as he turned towards the lizard man and shouted, "Graimore! Let's pull back!"

Nail and sword crossed with a sharp noise.

"Uh!" Perhaps he was jostled by the strike of his opponent or just lost his balance, but either way Gourry fell down, showing his back to the enemy.

The lizard man readied his nails to strike…

"Graimore! Let's pull back!" That was the moment when Zonagain's voice called out to him. Graimore hesitated with his

strike for a second.

In the same instant, Gourry whirled around and struck with the sword in his right hand towards him.

Another sharp sound hit the air… but the enemy was formidable. Despite his unstable posture, the nails on Graimore's right blocked the blow with ease. However…

Using the same momentum he swung the sword with, Gourry whirled around in the air again. His left hand moved to a quick strike!

"Kyak!" With a small scream, Graimore collapsed to the ground, and laid on his back, unmoving.

Something thin and long was stuck into the middle of his forehead, just like a nail—it was no less than his own nail, which Gourry cut off right before.

When Gourry fell down, he picked up the nail from the ground and, after creating a diversion with his sword, threw it at his opponent.

I don't know if he really had such good aim or just got lucky, though…

Realizing that Graimore was dead, Zonagain ran into the forest without another word, hiding his presence.

I wanted to use this opportunity to deal with him for good, but blindly chasing after him would've been dangerous. Also, I was worried about Aria at that moment.

Luckily, her boots and pants had kept her from serious harm, but it was still no good to leave her like that.

“You need to start with warming up your leg,” I told her.

“Hey, are you okay?” the strange newcomer asked, sounding worried.

I turned my head towards him. “We must treat her injuries first. I’ll listen to the introductions after that.”

“My name is Dilarl,” the man said, throwing a piece of firewood into the campfire.

We already gathered some, made a campfire, warmed up Aria’s leg and could finally take a few deep breaths after all the excitement.

The man seemed to be over twenty years old, his hair was black and he seemed to be a bit on the skinny side. With some good clothes, he might have looked more handsome, but as things stood his beard, which was left to grow as it pleased, and his crumpled attire did not do him any favors.

“Err… Thank you for what you did earlier.” Warming her iced leg at the campfire, Aria lowered her head towards Dilarl slightly in a gesture of gratitude.

The guy waved his hand in front of his chest. “Oh, it’s okay, really. It’s a man’s duty to save the beauty when she’s in a situation like that,” he replied in an easygoing voice. “By the way, what’s your name?”

“I’m called Aria.”

“And these two are your slaves?”

“Hey…!” I snapped instantly, sending him an unkind look.

“Yes, they are.”

“What?!”

“That… That was a joke…” Aria hurriedly shook her head, seeing my scary face. “They are helping me reach Crimson.”

“Crimson?!” Hearing her words, Dilarl’s eyes widened. “Then you’re heading to the town on the guild’s request, too?”

“‘Too’? Then are you—?” I interjected, but he threw a glance at me and said,

“Do not interrupt a conversation between the beauty and the handsome. That’s the duty of a person who is neither.”

“What did you saaaaaay?!?!”

“Woah! Lina! Calm down!” Gourry grabbed me just before I exploded with earth-shattering rage.

“Ahm, let me introduce them. This is Ms. Lina Inverse and Mr. Gourry,” Aria said with a smile on her face—but the moment she spoke our names, Dilarl backed far away from us with loud steps. He was looking at me like he’s terrified.

“L… Lina… Inverse… No, I mean *Ms.* Lina Inverse…?” he mumbled.

“Yes,” I answered curtly.

“You are *the* Lina Inverse?”

“I have a bad feeling about this ‘the Lina Inverse’-thing, but yeah, I might be her.”

“Aaaaaah!” Just as I finished my reply, Dilarl folded his hands and began to beg. “I’m so sorry! Please forgive my impolite behavior, I didn’t know! Please spare this only life that I have! I’ll give you all my money!”

“Hey!” I snapped. *What the heck did this guy hear in rumors about me?!*

“Err… Mr. Dilarl, there’s no need for you to tremble like that. She is not as much of a terrible person as the rumors say…” Aria spoke with an embarrassed look.

Honestly, I did not care much about what she was saying either way, because I just knew it would come to bite me back in the end.

Dilarl crawled on his knees towards Aria, gripped both of her shoulders and whispered in a serious manner,

“Don’t, Aria. Associating with such people you don’t even know; what would you do if you were infected by the ‘Lina Inverse’-disease?”

“Did you just say diseaaaaaase?!”

“Argh! You’ve heard!” Hearing my shout, Dilarl ran farther away again.

That jerk!

“Don’t be so worried like that. Look at me, I’ve been travelling with this girl for a long while, but…” Gourry started in a cheerful

manner, but trailed off suddenly. Then finally, he scratched his head and mumbled, “Forget it… it’s nothing…”

“Hey, if you keep talking with so much gloom in your voice, they’ll think that travelling with me was horrible!” I protested.

“So did I have a good time somewhere since I’ve started travelling with you?”

Oops… Come to think of it… No… but…

“Well… anyway…” I shifted my gaze towards Aria. “She said she was in trouble, so yes, if you don’t mind, we are heading towards Crimson.”

“Is she in trouble?” Dilarl echoed.

“Yes…” Aria began to explain her situation to him.

“Hmm… I see…” After her recollection was over, Dilarl approached the campfire again while stroking his chin with his thumb. “But Aria, if you really want to go to Crimson, let me give you some advice. Give up on using this road to get there straight away.”

“Eh? Why?” she asked unsurely.

“As you could probably guess, I’m a sorcerer too. Like you guys, I was asked by the guild to go to Crimson. Though the pay is next to nothing, I’m out of money, so I had to accept the request anyway. But a half day’s walk from here, the army of the king is suffering guerrilla attacks from lesser demons and brass demons.”

“Attacks by demons?” I narrowed my eyes in realization.

I wanted to think this was Zonagain's doing, but if it was, then his demons would have found us too. But then…there was another enemy on Cairus' side who had the same magic skill as the gramps, or even greater…

The king's army won't be getting an easy victory after all.

While I was thinking, Dilarl continued with his story. "So those people are conscripting all magic users passing by, threatening them that they'd disobey the king otherwise. They won't even pay anything. I was about to get conscripted myself, but it was horrible to think that I'd be downtrodden by those high and mighty soldiers, so I took off from there in a hurry. After that, I ran into you people. So if you want to get to Crimson before the king's army, you must not meet them, or they will catch you. You have to give up on going this way."

He talks sense.

"You're right, but if we stop here and choose another route instead, we will have to make a detour. Who knows how much time it would take to reach Crimson that way," I said, folding my arms.

If we go the long way to avoid being conscripted into the army, it's possible that we'd only arrive to the city when everything is already over. That would make no sense.

"If that is the case…" Now it was Aria's turn to take up the conversation. "I know a way to get us through anyhow."

Let’s Go! Our Destination is the Sorcerer’s Guild!

Crimson Town.

I had never been there until now, although I’d heard of it before. Originally, the town was formed by connecting the countless small islands floating within a huge lake. Numerous canals ran between them, and the main form of transportation were the tiny boats that went back and forth. All of the buildings in town were painted to a white color.

From this explanation, it was already clear that the place was pretty good as a tourist attraction, but… before, there always was a question I could not get my head around.

That being, why the town’s name was ‘Crimson’.

Now though…

“I see… so that’s the reason why it’s called Crimson.” As I glanced down at the town from a high mountain slope, the mystery clearly solved itself.

CRIMSON?

It was late afternoon, just when the sun was sinking behind a mountaintop. Bathed in orange-red sunlight, the water in the canals glittered with scarlet, and all the buildings were dyed to a bright crimson color, like they were burning.

Indeed, the spectacular sight fit the title of 'Crimson Town' really well.

"We can get to the city if we head down a bit… in that direction," Aria said, stepping forth from the bushes behind me.

'Let's use the waterway after climbing up the mountain'—that's what she suggested. Aria told us that if we left the road, took a small detour and hiked a mountain which looked like it had no connection to Crimson whatsoever, we could avoid the king's army and reach the catchment area, the source of the city's water.

Since Crimson was built around a lake, it needed to have some kind of water supply, and a bigger one passed by this very mountain. Aria said she stumbled across it while playing with her sister when she was young.

A fond memory with her sister used like this… Is that a good or bad omen, I wonder?

"Well then, shall we hustle on?" With those words, Dilarl shamelessly put his arm around Aria's shoulder.

Yep, there he was. After all that terrified blah-blah, he eventually decided to follow us anyway.

Since he was commissioned by the guild, he could not back out now, but he couldn't follow the road to the king's army either. So he

had no choice but to join us—or so he said, anyway. To me it looked more like he was just trying to hit on Aria.

"Er… well… Mr. Dilarl…" she mumbled.

"Hmm?… Heh, are you scared, Aria?"

"She's trying to tell you to *knock it off!!*" The sole of my boot hit Dilarl in the face.

"Really… Don't be like that, Aria," I turned to her. "If you don't tell him to get lost in earnest, this guy will never quit."

"Ah… I see…" That was all she had to say to my kind advice.

"Ouch…" Dilarl moaned. "Was I that bad? It is fine that you're being strict, but—"

"Yes, that's one of my strong points," I said flatly. Dilarl fell silent, giving me some unpleasant looks. "Anyway, Aria, guide us to that water source."

"Okay." She nodded in response, pushing aside some bushes in front of us.

After a bit of walking, we could hear the sound of running water.

"Here's the place." Aria came to a halt. We were already some distance away from where we last stopped.

Gourry glanced around with an awkward expression. "This looks like a waterfall."

"Yes. It *is* a waterfall," she replied with an entirely straight face.

Yeah… it really was. A large stream of water poured down the

cliff with a loud noise. We were looking at the waterfall from a spur of rock at the midpoint between the top and the bottom; the part below us was roughly as high as a building's second floor. They might as well have called this place a valley instead of just a river—the enormous body of cold water fell from the cliff in a foreboding manner.

"You… you're not saying that we have to jump down from here, right?" Gourry asked, trembling.

Aria, however, waved her hand in front of her chest and said, "No, I wouldn't. There are two or three waterfalls like this one later on, so if we try something like that, we will die."

Right… I finally found out why the king's army or Cairus' gang didn't bother with this route.

"But after we descend from here somehow," she continued, "Crimson will be right in front of us."

Ah, I get it. So we just have to descend from the—

Err…

"Wait a minute!" I marched up to Aria. "What do you mean by 'somehow'?! Are you saying that you didn't think of a way we can get down from this place?!"

"N-No, I meant that there are several ways to do that," she stuttered. "We can travel on the surface of the water with Levitation, or descend down the mountain road which follows this valley… I don't think the mountain road would be very comfortable… but it can't be that terrible either since I managed to climb up here when I

was young."

"I'm sorry, but both ways are a no-go," I shot down Aria's suggestion.

"You think so…?"

"If we take either route, Cairus' men would definitely detect us," I explained. "If a Crimson resident like Aria knows this way, chances are good that Cairus, who's been living there for a while too, would also know about it. Of course, this isn't a place where dozens or hundreds of people could pass through, which means that even if the king's army would be aware of it, they wouldn't use it, so Cairus probably doesn't keep a large force here… but we're still better off thinking that he must have left at least one patrol, and we'll probably find more as we get closer to the town. Going under the cover of darkness won't help either, as the noises we make going through these bushes will be heard. Though getting discovered wouldn't be the end of us, it could make our task a lot harder."

"B… But how will we…? It's going to take a lot of time for us to find a different way down," Aria said.

"Hmm…" With a sigh, I glanced down the waterfall. The stream fell into the deep blue water with a thunder-like sound. "Aria, how deep is this river?"

"Sorry? Ah… Well, if it weren't for the waterfalls, it's deep enough that we could travel on it by ship."

"Okay. Then I decided what the plan will be," I stated.

"What are you going to do?" Aria asked. I pointed at a more

distant part of the river.

"We'll go *under* the water."

For a while, only the sound of the waterfall could be heard around us.

"Whaaaaaat?!" Gourry, Aria and Dilarl yelled at the same time.

"Hey, Lina! Do you mean we have to swim down from here?"

"That doesn't make sense! I told you there is another waterfall!"

"It's better to fight some enemies than to simply jump down from here like that!"

"SHUT*UP!!* Who said that we have to swim?!" I shouted, silencing the terrible racket. "When did I say anything like that? That would be crazy, obviously, we'd kick the bucket for sure! I thought we can use a rapid flight spell called Ray Wing, which creates a shield of wind around us. With that, we could breathe under the water, and because the river is very deep, if we sink low enough no one will be able to see us!"

Of course, it would be too much for a normal Ray Wing to carry the four of us, but if I boosted the magic's power using the talismans I bought from a certain person, it wouldn't be impossible.

"Oh right! I understand!"

"If that's what you meant, then I have no complaints." Both Aria and Dilarl nodded quickly to my suggestion.

"You don't? But I still have a bad feeling about this…" Gourry still stuck to being the lone complainer, but I ignored him.

That said, though, just between you and me, this time his misgivings were justified.

“Well, if we are decided, then let’s leave right away. Bind yourselves to a lifeline and be careful not to drop your gear or weapon in the water,” I said, quickly readying myself as well.

It goes without saying that I had recovered the short sword that was turned into a lump of ice during the fight with Zonagain. It was not a great sword but it wasn’t a cheap one either. Not wanting to lose it in the water, I bound the sheath and the hilt with a rope, which I also knotted to my belt and fastened it.

I buckled the lifeline to my belt as well… and it seemed like the other three were ready too.

“Well then, shall we get going?” They inclined their heads in response. I nodded back, and began chanting a spell under my breath.

“Ray Wing!”

Surrounded by the barrier of wind, the four of us floated down through the stream of water.

“Liar! Ms. Lina, you crook!”

“Shut your mouth, Aria! You’re going to bite your tongue!”

The screams of Aria and Dilarl filled the wind barrier.

Well… I don’t blame them for screaming, honestly. I *could* describe our current situation as ‘drifting along in the water inside a bubble of air’, but saying that the journey was in any way

comfortable, like being on a cruise ship or something, would be too much even for a lie.

Deep water or not, the bottom of the river was anything but flat; there were uneven rocks everywhere, and the riverbed twisted and turned erratically with its width changing all the time as well. Also, the current was very strong down there, its direction changing randomly without warning.

So, that was the environment we had to navigate through with Ray Wing.

Okay, 'navigate' is a bit strong of a word; to be frank, we were more or less swept away. I controlled the movement of the spell when we fell into a waterfall, but except that, we were moving almost completely with the river currents.

I really don't want to describe how it feels to travel like this.

All in all, I understood why Aria and Dilarl were screaming in terror, but… I could not tolerate them calling me a 'liar' or 'crook'. I never said anything like 'it won't be a bumpy ride' or 'it will be safe', after all.

In contrast to the two, Gourry was keeping his mouth firmly shut when I glanced at him over my shoulder. His expression spoke without words, though: "My life is always like this," it said.

Anyway, since we were already in the middle of things, there was no other choice but to ask them to endure it until we arrived to Crimson.

We have passed by three spots that looked like a waterfall—

okay, maybe fell, not passed. According to Aria's description, we should have been near the city now. However, it wasn't possible for me to have a look around just like that. To get a glimpse of what's going on above the water, we would've needed to float to the surface with the wind barrier—but it was really easy for anyone to spot us like that, so if there were any enemies around, I'm sure we would've been discovered in a heartbeat.

So our only option was to look at our surroundings within the river. Maybe when we entered the town, the currents would slow down a bit and we could catch some signs of civilization at the river bank. As the sun had already completely set, the visibility was getting pretty bad, but the bright moonlight still let me see a bit of what was going on around us.

Speaking of which, I feel the currents became gentler a little while ago…

Directing the spell's movement, my eyes darted left and right.

And next to us…

As I glanced to the right, the voice was caught in my throat.

"Ms. Lina?" Aria turned towards the same direction I was facing… and fell silent as well.

There was an *eye* there.

Outside the barrier of wind, there was an eye, roughly the size of an adult fist, staring at us. It was trailing our barrier, matching its speed. Honestly, it was more revolting than just odd; the eye's owner could not be clearly seen, but I was able to glimpse a sizable shadow

floating in the water.

"Uhm… I…" Aria turned towards me, her voice and expression stiff. "M-Maybe it's a fish?

I don't think so…

Instead of answering, I increased the spell's speed without a word. The eye which was following us from our right dropped behind.

Then we heard something crack.

"Woaaah?!" The noise and Dilarl's yell hit the air at the same time.

I glanced in his direction to see a number of wriggling green tentacles had broken through the wind barrier, feeling their way towards us.

"What?" Not hindered by the small bubble, Gourry quickly drew his sword and sliced the tentacles off.

Of course! The enemy's men aren't so careless to leave the numerous canals in the city without surveillance!

"We've been found out! Let's move up!" I shouted.

After this turn of events, staying in the water would have done us more harm than good now. I lifted the spell and floated towards the surface.

The moment I tried to go higher, however, we could feel a dull impact as something crashed into the surface of the wind barrier.

"Ms. Lina! Above!" Hearing Aria's words, I looked up, and saw two strangely shaped shadows swimming in our direction, as if they were try to overturn the barrier. Although I could only see two black silhouettes before the surface of the water, they certainly weren't fish.

The two shades closed in on us with a wavering motion. In the next instant, two fins, looking more like sharp blades actually, penetrated the barrier of wind and entered inside.

"Haa!" Gourry hurriedly struck at them with his blade. But, even though his swordfighting skills were top-notch, the small, confined space where he could barely move limited their effectiveness: the fin he hit shrank back for a moment, as if it lost its nerve, but then pushed deeper inside once more.

"Aria! Use Freeze Arrow!" I commanded.

"Huh? But Freeze Arrow is…" She hesitated, not understanding what I meant.

Dilarl cast the spell instead. "Freeze Arrow!" His icy projectiles did not come into existence within the barrier, but outside of it; namely at the place where the two shadows stuck to our shield.

Of course, I couldn't be sure that the Freeze Arrows would have an effect on the shades—but they could definitely freeze the water. As they emerged, they solidified everything around them, blocking out the pair of shadows! The fins which broke into the barrier retreated along with them.

Good! Thanks to that, the way up is clear!

I gave the Ray Wing spell some juice, and, slicing through the surface of the water, the barrier leaped forward into the night sky.

Countless stars covered the heavens. The drops of water flying through the air glittered in the moonlight. A flock of birds flew into the sky, and we could see the dark rows of the city buildings—we've arrived inside Crimson Town.

…Err… A flock of birds?

I turned my head back and did a double take. In the middle of the night these should have been owls or maybe bats—but those which flew through the Crimson sky were neither, even if their wings were similar to the latter.

Well, at least I wouldn't call the human-sized, spear-wielding whatsits 'bats', similar wings or no.

Their form copied the shape of a human, but these things-I'd-rather-not-describe-in-detail were staring at us with faces without eyes, mouth or nose, with dozens of what looked to be lesser demons following after them.

Oh, damn it! First the underwater troops, now we get to meet the flight squad?

I wouldn't have been able to move freely in our current condition, so I directed the spell to land at a nearby road, and dispelled Ray Wing.

In the meantime, some shadows rushed out of the canal with a splashing noise. The scales covering their body glittered in the moonlight—they seemed like a combination of a lesser demon and a

fish. Where their hands and feet should have been were the blade-like fins that broke our wind barrier earlier.

"Hooah!" The moment their emerged, Gourry broke into a run, gripping his sword!

"Wait, Gourry—" Before I could finish, both he and I fell to the ground with a thud.

I immediately sprang to my feet. "How could you forget that we're bound together by the lifeline?!" I shouted.

"S-Sorry! Gourry stood up hurriedly, cut the rope with a swing of his blade and dashed forward once more. We also untied the rope around the sheath and our weapons and cut the lifeline as well.

Gourry's sword sparkled in the moonlight, and sliced at the half-fish half-demon thing.

"Khyaaaaaak!" Not far from us, another one of them howled at the night sky—right before countless icy arrows materialized in front of it.

Not good!

"Gourry! Get back!" I shouted, whirled around, and broke into a run.

The new enemy total was a couple of these half-fishes, dozens of winged lesser demons and one of those human-like winged creatures. I was sure we could defeat them, but it would have taken us some time to bring them down—and during that time reinforcements were bound to arrive. We needed a minute to organize our forces first.

“H… Hey! Lina!” Gourry hastily followed after me; of course, Aria and Dilarl started to run as well.

Flapping of wings stirred the air. I could feel a murderous presence behind me, so I dashed into an alley while chanting a spell. As I looked up, between the buildings I could see some of the winged lesser demons floating in front of the night sky.

It looks like they can’t enter such a narrow alley because those wings would be in the way.

Still, we couldn’t relax; they will simply attack us with a spell from above!

“Khyaaaak!” The howls of the demons could be heard from the sky. At the same moment, I put my hand on the wall of the house next to me, and released my spell.

“Blast Wave!” With a sharp, crashing sound, a large hole was made into the wall. “Here!” I said and ran into the building through it, the others following behind.

“You blasted into someone’s hou—?!” Before Aria could finish yelling at me, a thunderous noise cut her short as a cloud of dust filled the alley. I knew the demons would launch a spell like that from above, which is why I ducked into the house.

While Aria looked concerned about it, I don’t think the house had any residents. I suspected as much because no light could be seen within from the outside: it was too early for people to go to sleep, but already too dark to see without lighting a fire. My suspicion proved right when we got in, as the interior was

completely unfurnished, with no trace of a living soul.

I couldn't tell if the owners escaped from town because of what was happening, or if no one ever lived here to begin with—but anyway, the real problem was what to do now that we were there.

Of course, once the enemy discovers where we are, they will attack us again.

Maybe they'll try to overwhelm us through sheer numbers…

No… More like…

I started to chant a spell under my breath.

Mere moments later, the house was crushed by the demons' magical onslaught.

We could hear something collapse.

"I was expecting this…" I murmured silently within the darkness, listening to the vibrations of something heavy nearby.

"What do you mean you were expecting this?"

"That they'd try to blew us all up along with the house," I answered Aria's question. It was difficult to hold a conversation in our current situation, though, so I whispered another spell chant. "Lighting."

With a sparkle, the small magical light I created illuminated the place. It looked like all of us made it safely.

"Lina, couldn't you have made it larger in here? It's too narrow like this," Gourry complained.

“There was no helping it, I didn’t have time for anything more. I can enlarge it a bit, but not by much. We’re in the middle of the earth, you know.”

After running into the empty house, I figured that they were going to level it along with us, so with Bephis Bring, a tunnel-digging spell, we escaped underground into a hole. If I put my mind to it, I can create a space the size of a smaller room with this spell, but using it like that without any kind of support would make the cavity collapse.

Regardless, it sure felt odd talking in this insanely narrow tunnel, huddled up next to each other like some earthworms.

I cast another spell. “Bephis Bring.”

Heeding my commands, the soil around us receded… wait, let me think about this. Where does the earth dug up by the spell disappear to, anyway…?

At any rate, eventually the space became big enough for four people to sit down in a circle.

“Still… things got pretty nasty back there…” It was none other than me who spoke first. “I knew that since this was their base, they’d focus their fighting power here… but I didn’t expect coming across all these demons in various forms…”

“Demons…? You mean those men with wings and the half-fish creatures were demons?”

I nodded to Dilarl, who was frowning with his brows furrowed.

“I don’t know what those human-shaped, winged creeps are…

But to me the other ones with wings and the ones with the half-fish body look like transformed lesser demons, who were created a bit differently compared to their normal lesser demon buddies; you could call them close relatives. I mean, that half-fish thing summoned freeze arrows with a howl, just like the lesser demons do."

Of course, this was just my theory, but what if the creatures were made using fish and birds as base, with the same method Zonagain used on rats?

Listening to my words, Dilarl stroked his chin with his thumb and muttered, "It… It looks like I ended up in a real hellhole… Being ordered around by the king's army suddenly doesn't seem so bad as an option anymore."

"I'm sorry… I got you involved in this…" Aria murmured in a sad tone—prompting Dilarl to back away from his prior words in a frenzy.

"Ah, no, no! Don't mind what I said, Aria! I didn't mean it like that! I just wanted to say that tough work like this isn't meant for those who're much too refined, like you and me."

"Huh…?"

"Just what do you mean by that, exactly?" Gourry and me questioned him from the sides.

"N-No, I didn't mean that you guys are crass or something!"

This guy… is going to lose his life to his mouth.

"Anyway," I added, "the question is what to do now. If those

demons are going to swarm us again, I'd really feel like blowing up the whole town and get things over with…"

"No, Ms. Lina! You can't do that! There are still people in here!"

"Y-Yes! Even if you want to bring the enemy down… please get your priorities straight, alright?" Aria and Dilarl protested after hearing my plans, their expression changing from stupified to outraged.

"You guys thought I was serious? It was just a silly joke!"

"Your eyes did not look like it."

"Stop complaining for nothing, Gourry! Anyway, if our plan is to rush to the enemy's main base and defeat Cairus before anything else, then our only problem is how to get there. Aria, do you know how can we get to Cairus from where we are now?"

"I think Cairus might be at the Sorcerer's Guild…" she said. "The place we're in now is the issue, I don't know every single part of this town all that well… Maybe I could guess where we are if it was daytime…"

"In other words, you have no idea, right?"

"I'm sorry… I'm not of much help…" Aria shrunk back apologetically.

"Ah, don't worry about it," I replied. "So, it seems we have to figure out our location. We better get to it quickl—"

"But Lina, wouldn't it be dangerous to go up right now?" Gourry interrupted me with his opinion when I was about to chant a spell.

The way he can stumble upon such crucial issues never fails to amaze me ever since I met him.

"You have a point," I answered. "Yes, their troops are probably patrolling around us as we speak. But if we waste too much time here, we might not get to the enemy base before it's too late, not to mention that the way we are now is really not the proper situation for a time-out."

The entrance of this cave got blocked when the demons blew up the house we ran into, so if we didn't move quickly, we might have ran out of air. And even if that didn't happen, what if the enemy is very thorough and wants to find our corpses among the debris, only to come upon the cave entrance? What would they do? If I'm on their side, I'd pour water into it without hesitation.

All in all, if we kept waiting here like this, our situation would've only gotten worse, not better.

I murmured an incantation.

"Bephis Bring!" I put my hand to the earth wall, and a long straight tunnel formed in the soil ahead with a soft sound. "So, how about we move forward in a single file while I dig the tunnel ahead?"

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Still…

"Bephis Bring!"

Even though you could call this simple work…

"Bephis Bring!"

I wouldn't say it was easy. At least, it was quickly getting on my nerves.

"Again! Bephis Bring!" I kept casting the same spell over and over.

Then, after the who-knows-which time, water spilled from the soil of the tunnel. I illuminated the path ahead, and sure enough, it was completely drenched.

On a side note, the light in question was coming from the tip of my sword. Normally, it could not be extinguished until the spell itself expired, but like this I could put the light out by sheathing my blade.

"There's some water coming out…" I spoke up.

"Yes, like I said earlier, there used to be a lake here," Aria replied. "Also, there's a canal somewhere nearby, so… Oh, I forgot to mention that. It could be very bad if we hit the canal by accident, so it might be better if we go deeper than this."

"Okay, got it." I cast another Bephis Bring to deepen our tunnel, and we crawled through the wet ground.

"But… I… I can't take this. It's horrible," Dilarl could be heard complaining from the back. "My clothes are soaked and… I just feel so very filthy."

"Stop whining, Dilarl. Both Aria and me are doing this without a word," I growled.

"You're right, but… is there no easier method except this?" he insisted.

“If you’ll take care of all our pursuers when we’re detected, going back to the surface is fine by me.”

“But that’s impossi—! All right, all right! I’ll stop complaining and keep moving, okay?”

“My thoughts exactly.” With that, I started casting the spell for the umpteenth time; I lost count by that point.

“By the way, Lina…” Gourry spoke to me as I chanted the incantation. “Something has been bugging me since a little while ago… Hey, are you listening?”

Of course I was listening. I just couldn’t reply since I was in the middle of releasing my spell.

“It feels like the texture of the earth became different…” he continued.

Oh, give me a break.

“Bephis Bring.” After lengthening the tunnel with my spell, I crouched down and muttered, “It’s no wonder it feels like that since, you know, the earth looks almost like mud right now.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. This feeling is—”

“Then what do you mea—” No sooner than those words left my mouth, my right hand sank deep into the ground with a wet sound.

Huh?

At that moment, an overwhelming current of water blasted forth abruptly, and swept us away.

“Urgh… Unngh…..” After letting out a groan, I blinked two or three times. As I opened my eyes, fluorescent moss filled my field of vision.

I pushed myself up while checking my body for injuries; fortunately, it looked like I made it in one piece. Gourry was out cold beside me, though.

When I looked around, I could see water stretching out endlessly in the distance. Inside the lake, there were several islands each the size of a small house; Gourry and I were also lying on one of them. Aria and Dilarl were swept to another island not far from us. The ceiling of the cave was covered by the same fluorescent moss.

“An underground lake…?” It wasn’t me but Aria who said that in a murmur, as she came to and sat up on their own small island.

It sure looked like it. A great underground lake unfolded before our eyes right below Crimson Town. Obviously, I had no idea that a place like this existed here.

“Hey… What’s going on?” I glanced at Dilarl as he sat up.

“It could be that… there was a stream of water running below the lake which was also connected to it. And when our tunnel nearly hit it…”

“…The tunnel floor collapsed,” he finished my line of thought.

“Right. Hey, Gourry, how long do you plan on just lying there?”

“Ungh… Uhh…” As I shook him, he let out a groan, his body moving slightly…

…then he abruptly jumped to his feet, looked around, and finally chose to glare at me.

"This is what I've been trying to tell you just now," he told me. "It felt like we were walking on really thin ice."

"Ah… I see…" I scratched the top of my head with an embarrassed look.

"This… This is the first time I've been here. I never would have thought that there'd be a lake under the town…" Aria murmured in a blank tone, looking around after we managed to gather in one spot using Levitation.

The light from the fluorescent moss was not very bright, and there were several natural stone pillars which connected the ceiling with the lake floor blocking the view, so we couldn't see all that far. Still, the fact that we could not see the lake shore might have meant that…

Could this underground lake be bigger than Crimson Town?

I could completely understand Aria's astonishment at the fact that there was something like this under her hometown, but… the real problem right now was…

"So you mean you have no idea how we can go back to the surface from here, right?"

"I'm sorry… I didn't know anything about this…" Aria mumbled.

"I already told you that you don't need to apologize. It looks like no one got seriously hurt, anyway," I interjected. "We surely

couldn't have been swept too far from where we were previously… But regardless, we have only one option; it seems we have to dig our way up little by lit—"

There was a rustling noise. A presence appeared behind me, still far away.

I instinctively turned around, but all my eyes could see was the calm surface of the lake.

"What's wrong?" I did not answer Aria's question, but started chanting a spell instead. There was no way that presence was just my imagination. Confirming my suspicion, Gourry, who had both the intelligence and the instincts of an animal, pulled out his sword and quietly focused his gaze on the lake surface. And then…

My eyes caught shadows moving under the water; not just one or two, but a whole lot of them!

Are these the same creatures we encountered earlier?

A moment later, like I suspected, the same kind of fish demons from before broke through the lake's surface. The fluorescent moss' dim light shined on their scales..

"Freeze Brid!" Timing my attack to the instant when demons rose from the water, the cold energy froze part of the surface. Some of the demons slipped on the ice while one of them got stuck with half of its body frozen

"Haaa!" Gourry dashed towards the demons, not bothered by the slippery ice at all!

These creatures weren't the kind to stand still while being

attacked though.

"Khyaaaak!" The cries of the demons echoed through the underground cave as dozens of Freeze Arrows appeared in front of them.

Wait! Aren't those—?!

Cutting through the air with a hiss, the arrows flew right at us!

Gourry continued to run without slowing down one bit, and parried a couple of the projectiles—they scattered in the air, turning into countless bubbles that twinkled in the light from above.

"Water?" Dilarl spoke up from behind.

He was right. The arrows made by the demons weren't from frozen, but from liquid water.

That didn't mean we could take them lightly though. One such arrow passed by me with a sharp noise, cutting a hole into my cloak. The projectiles were made of high-pressure, high-speed water, which gave them enormous destructive power.

"Aria! Dilarl! Freeze more of the lake with a couple of spells so we can move around more!" I shouted to them without turning back, and started chanting my own incantation.

"O… Okay!"

"Understood!"

By that time, Gourry already took down two of the demons, and was now facing a third.

Suddenly, he halted his movement, and made a wide leap to the right—just before several water arrows shot up from where he had been standing, sent by another enemy who tried attacking him from below the ice.

I couldn't see the attacker, not to mention make out how many of them were below us—for now, we had to concentrate on blasting those we could get a glimpse of.

"Dynast Breath!"

One shot of my spell aimed at a shadow beneath the water—one less demon to worry about!

I turned my eyes on Gourry, who seemed to be doing a great job getting rid of all the enemies that came out of the water.

Great! Let's fall back to the small island for now, so we can force more demons out of the lake!

Just when I was about to tell this to Gourry, however…

"Gaah!"

"Aria!" Two yells came from behind my back, accompanied by the sound of a loud burst of water. When I turned back, all I could see was Dilarl standing there with a blank look on his face next to a fragment of ice floating upon the surface.

Aria was nowhere to be found.

Don't tell me she's—

"Aria fell into the water!" Dilarl shouted with desperation in his voice. "Can… Can't you do something?!"

If there were no enemies below, I could use Ray Wing, find Aria and save her, but… even if I do find her now, to get her out of there I'd have to pull her within the wind barrier and float back to the surface while holding her tightly. I don't think our opponents would watch us motionlessly while all of that happened.

Also, would they ignore someone who just fell into the water alone?

Maybe she is already—

"Where's Aria?!" Gourry questioned us as he returned to where we were. Neither I nor Dilarl could bring ourselves to answer. The demons did halt their attack temporarily just now, but—

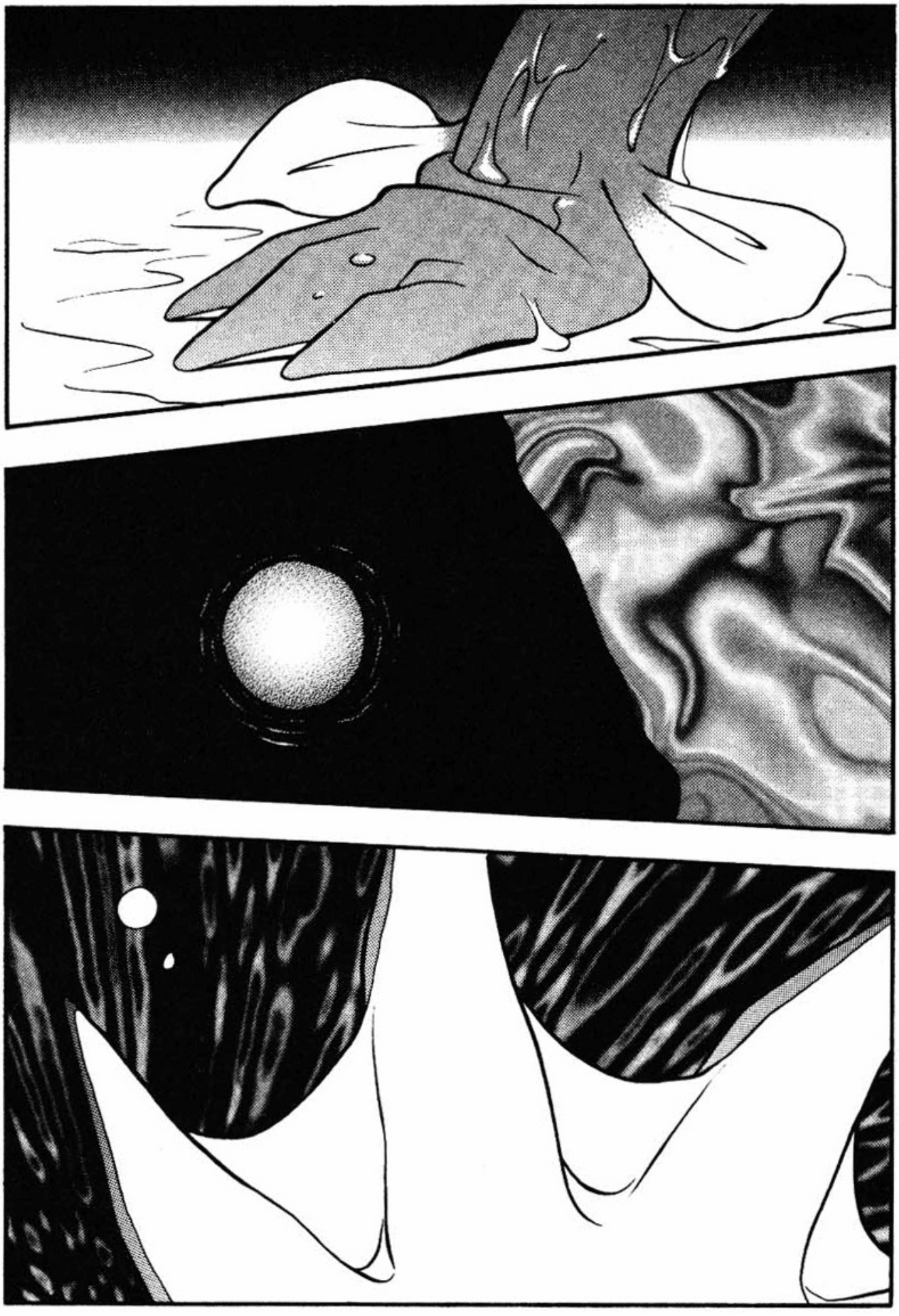
The sound of splashing water came from our right. We quickly looked in that direction—and saw a man we've never met before standing on an island a bit farther away.

If you asked me to describe him, well, I could find no better likeness than that of a bluish-green drowned corpse.

Of course, he was no simple corpse or zombie. There were large scales at the end of his swollen toes, and his long-nailed fingers were webbed, a thin film-like substance running between them. Maybe those tentacles of sorts that broke into our wind barrier at the canal when we entered Crimson Town were actually his limbs.

All in all, to be honest, the guy looked pretty revolting—so much so, actually, that I had the urge to unleash all kinds of attack spells into his face just by looking at him. There was one thing, however, that kept me from doing that:

He held Aria within his arms.



“She is alive… for now…” the thing spoke in a kind of a wet voice, like someone talking with his mouth full.

“Ugh…” As if to prove his point, Aria opened her eyes, her body moving a bit. “Huh? What happened…? Noooo!” Realizing the situation she was in, she twisted and turned desperately, but the arm held her firm. Meanwhile, the other hand moved to cover her mouth to keep her from casting a spell.

“So… It looks like you managed to find out where we are,” I addressed the guy.

“You will regret it if you underestimate me, the Great Narof,” he boasted. “As you have attacked us using the waterway above, we did not think you would try reaching Mr. Cairus through here. But still, you wouldn’t cross the whole town to get there… so the only remaining route was this.”

Huh?

“Hmm… you said your name was Narof, right?” I replied. “You might seem to lead these underwater guards of Crimson, but you still look like a total idiot.”

“Whaat?” Narof yelled, sounding every bit as clueless as I described him.

“If it’s as you say and this is ‘the only remaining route’,” I gestured at our surroundings, “that means there exists a way for us to reach the guild from here! How nice of you to let us know!”

“What? Then… then you didn’t know what place this is?”

“No, we didn’t! We were simply washed up here by accident!”

“I don’t think we can talk about that like we’re proud of it or something…”

I completely ignored Gourry’s quip, hope you don’t mind.

Narof’s expression didn’t change at all after hearing my words—well, if he was able to change the look on his face to begin with. “I see… But if I get rid of you here, it will be over regardless… I warn you now, don’t resist. If you fight back, who knows what will happen to this woman?”

Taking this threat as a signal, around ten of these fish demons came to the surface, surrounding our island. We could’ve dealt with this many easily enough; the real problem was that Aria was being held hostage.

In a situation like this, the one thing I can count on… is my superb silver tongue!

“Pfft… Don’t make me laugh!” I snapped. “How could we believe that you’d release Aria if we don’t fight back?”

“The Great Narof will give you his word,” he answered fluently. “I only wish to be able to get rid of you; although I will lose this girl, she cannot harm Mr. Cairus by herself…”

Raising my voice, I yelled back at him, “Stop kidding! Who would believe the word of someone like you who cowardly takes hostages? You might say it’s not a problem for you if you let Aria go, but it wouldn’t be a problem for you to kill her afterwards either! Not to mention that a man with tentacles and a bluish-green face isn—” In mid-word, I took a half step to the side.

“Freeze Arrow!” The arrow of cold summoned by Dilarl flew forward and created a bridge of ice between the small island and Narof .

Gourry ran at full speed through the bridge!

“What the—?!” Narof managed a cry just before a wide swing from Gourry’s blade cut down his height by a head.

While I was having the conversation with him, I heard Gourry and Dilarl speaking about something in a hushed tone, and then Dilarl starting to chant a spell. So I diverted Narof’s attention by raising my voice, and stepped aside a bit when I figured Dilarl was finished with his incantation.

Narof’s body fell back without another sound; Gourry tore Aria from his arms before she sank into the water.

“Khyaaaaaak!” Hearing the splash, the demons around us began to howl all at once.

Are they attacking because they lost their commander?

I was prepared for this though! Jumping next to Dilarl, I touched the ground with my hand and released the spell into it which I’ve been chanting, right when the demons launched their water arrows.

“Bephis Bring!” With a rumble, the ground under my feet caved in, and Dilarl and me fell a short distance into the seashell-shaped crater I created. We ducked to the ground, and the countless water arrows passed over us in vain.

All right. Now it’s up to us to nail this fight.

I cast another spell while sticking my head out from the edge of the crater. “Blast Ash!”

Boom! One less fish demon, one more pile of ash.

The fight progressed pretty well for us.

The three of us chanted spells from the cover of the crater, standing up briefly to shoot and then ducking down again. If any reckless demon tried to rush in, Gourry’s sword cut it down in a single strike. Doing nothing but repeating this tactic, we steadily lessened the number of enemies.

In a bit more detail, the surface of the lake around our island was covered completely in ice thanks to our spells. We couldn’t be targeted from afar either since the crater was below ground level, so if the demons wanted to attack us, they needed to get to us by wading through the ice first. All we had to do is wait for one of them to give it a try, and use that moment to blast it. There was no danger of defeat as long as we didn’t let our guard down. If Narof had been alive, the enemy might have tried some kind of tactic, but without him the demons just kept attacking us blindly over and over again.

And a little later…

“It’s been pretty quiet,” Aria said after we had defeated an uncountable number of foes. “It looks like this was it.”

“Yeah, it seems so,” I replied, sticking my head out at the edge of the crater and looking around. There weren’t any demons to be seen anywhere. “No one’s there.”

“Is it finally over?” Dilarl mumbled with a sigh as he rose.

“Don’t let your guard down. While we can’t see any of them, they could still be hiding somewhere,” I warned him while standing up as well and looking around again.

No sign of any demons still. I think it’s okay to assume that we’ve dealt with all the attackers.

Well then…

“Believe it or not, according to that blue-green monster, there is a way to get to the guild from here somehow,” I told the others while turning back to them. “How about we find it and infiltrate the place?”

“Just like that? But Lina, finding our way here is…” Gourry trailed off as he glanced around, not sounding very enthusiastic.

Right, this underground lake is huge. We don’t know what the ‘way’ looks like, so finding it won’t be easy.

Not easy with mundane methods, that is.

“And also… won’t we just run into more enemies?”

“Sure, Dilarl, would you rather reach the guild by digging back to the surface and fighting all the demons coming from the sky?”

“Absolutely not… Such violent methods are no hobby of mine…”

“Is that so? Then leave it to me, I have a plan. Aria, Dilarl, you can cast a wind barrier or Levitation, right?”

“Yes,” she answered.

“Of course I can cast such easy spells,” he boasted.

“All right,” I said. “Then I’ll get the four of us into the air with Levitation, and you two create a double barrier of wind around us.”

“Why do we have to complicate things? Levitation should be enough,” Dilarl complained.

“You’ll find out why later. Let’s get to it.” I began to chant the spell and held hands with Gourry and Aria. Dilarl took Aria’s hand, and… “Levitation!”

Thanks to the boosted version of Levitation we floated up from the ground. Aria and Dilarl cast the same spell one after the other, summoning the double wind barrier around us.

Good. With that, we’re ready.

I directed the spell away from the island.

Even if I wanted to be optimistic, I couldn’t say that our surroundings were very helpful in finding secret passages. The fluorescent moss did not cover the whole cave, and the parts which were unlit looked pretty much like gaping holes. This in itself made it nearly impossible to find the path when we didn’t even know what it looked like. However…

“Say… Like your friend mentioned, isn’t it something of a fool’s errand to look for the passage like this?” Before long, Dilarl started mumbling.

“It’s okay, don’t be worried. Just don’t let your constant grizzling break your concentration on the barrier,” I shot back.

“I know, I know… but is this really okay?” He kept going. “Won’t we simply wander around aimlessly, and find that it was just a waste of time?”

“No, we *won’t*.”

In that moment, an impact shook the shield of wind with a short, dull sound.

“Lina! Behind us!”

Hearing Gourry’s warning, I commanded the spell to move back. There was another small island nearby with a natural pillar as well. But under that island…

The same sound of impact, again. Now it was clear: a couple of water arrows shot through the air and smashed into the barrier.

Is it there?

I tried forcing my eyes to penetrate the darkness, and could make out a couple of shadows moving around the lake.

“Hey, you! What are we going to do now?” Dilarl shouted.

“Ms. Lina, this is reckless!” Aria protested.

“Stop wailing and concentrate on the barrier!”

We were getting closer the small island I steered us toward, and the forms of our enemies gradually faded in from the black backdrop.

Some fish demons… and… what’s that?

Among the incoming water arrows, one crimson arrow appeared

as well. A sense of foreboding washed through me; I tried changing course, but the arrow was already upon us.

With a sharp, high-pitched sound, the crimson light penetrated both barriers without much effort.

Damn it…!

Metal clashed with magic energy; Gourry swatted the arrow away with his blade before it could've reached me. "Lina! Drop me off here!"

"D… Drop you off?!"

"Yes!"

"A… Alright. Dilarl, Aria! On my signal, dismiss the wind barrier, and launch Freeze and Flare Arrows at the enemy! Got it?"

"But… but…" she stuttered.

"Hey! Will that be alright? "

"Yes!" I cut their protests short. "Gourry! Are you ready?"

"Yeah! Whenever!"

I glanced in the direction of the enemy; the water arrows let out by the demons kept crashing against the barrier, and the crimson light appeared behind them again as well.

"Now!"

The barrier was gone. The crimson light was launched towards us.

I dropped Gourry off to the side of the pillar; as he jumped off,

the reactionary force pushed us back and away from him, and the crimson arrow flew by between us.

Gourry whirled through the air, and planted his sword into the vertical stone surface; as he descended, the blade cut through the rock, slowing his fall. He was near the midst of the enemy under the pillar now; they could not neglect him even if they wanted to.

“Freeze Arrow!” That was the moment when Aria and Dilarl finished their incantations. As the demons on the island were preoccupied with the fact that Gourry appeared above them, they were caught within the icy rainfall. The spell could not do them any harm of course, but it was enough to take their attention away from him.

“Aria, Levitation! Dilarl, wind barrier once more!” I ordered.

“Eh?”

“Okay!” Dilarl didn’t hesitate, although Aria paused for a moment before beginning her chant in a frenzy.

Meanwhile, the demons were still in a state of confusion, but one of them faced the approaching Gourry and howled loudly— water arrows materialized immediately around it.

Not good!

The demon unleashed its arrows on him— but suddenly, the direction of Gourry’s fall changed, letting him easily avoid them all.

Right! He changed his course by adjusting the angle of his sword stuck in the pillar!

He can be shockingly smart sometimes—although I suspect he was just following his intuition.

Anyway, Gourry made it to the center of our enemies, if only barely, while on our end…

"Windy Shield!"

"Levitation!"

…the two spells were finished!

"Whatever happens, keep your concentration, alright?" With that, I released my own Levitation magic and started chanting another incantation.

On the ground, the fight between the demons and Gourry was already underway. With his expertise, I expected him to take down a couple of them by now—but for whatever reason, he seemed to be having a hard time with merely one.

What the—? If we don't help him quickly—

"Fireball!" I released my modified spell. Originally, this incantation created a ball of light in the palm of the caster which exploded when it hit something, spreading flames, but now I managed to summon it outside the wind barrier, a little bit behind us.

That's it! Go!

"Break!" I flicked my finger, and—

Booooom!!

Crimson flames burst forth outside the shield!

“Gwaaaaaaah!”

“Aaaaaaaaaaah!”

The screams of Dilarl and Aria filled my ears as the pressure of the explosion hurled the barrier towards the battlefield below with breakneck speed!

It crashed into the lake right next to the island, spraying water everywhere.

Right, *that* got the demons’ attention.

Dilarl released the shield of wind, and at the same time—

“Blast Ash!” I was chanting this one as we fell; the spell turned the almost all the demons to ash.

“Aria, dismiss Levitation!” I commanded.

“Ah… yes!” She quickly released the spell, and we splashed into the knee-deep water. I thought the last remaining demon would attack us now, but it actually began to flee. I slowly walked onto the small island, Aria and Dilarl following behind.

Gourry seemed to be eyeing someone who wasn’t a fish demon.

A huge, billowing mass of white skin—that’s what it looked like at first. Shaped like a human-sized, half-deflated balloon, its skin was so pale that I could almost see through it —okay, that might be an overstatement, but it was at least as white as the face of a gravely ill person. At around the height of an average human’s chest, we could see a blond young man’s face. It was handsome like a statue;

like a relief that was carved into a very-very inappropriate place.

As if to prove to us that it was no statue, the face opened its mouth. “Nice to meet you. My name is Aireus.” His voice was certainly that of a human. “I’m vaguely aware of what’s going on here, although Narof proving so weak was unexpected. He was quite strong, but… it probably would have been better if he didn’t resort to taking a hostage, or hadn’t tried pursuing a fair fight.” He spoke plainly, as if we were having an idle chat. “Still, it was such a pity. So I think I’ll provide him with a seat and let him play a more active part now.”

“What do you mean… by that?” Dilarl asked incredulously.

“What I am saying is this…” Aireus smiled widely.

The mass of skin beside his head seemed to protrude.

“Uugh!” Aria unwittingly gagged at the abhorrent scene.

Next to Aireus’ head… the head of Narof, the same one we cut off, appeared to take form.

A Fight to the Death Breaks out in the Lake Town

"Graaaah!" Narof's formerly severed head cried out. Tentacles spurted from its mouth, twisting wildly.

Did this guy… absorb Narof's corpse?

I had no idea what kind of abilities Narof had while alive, but one thing was for sure: my already bad feelings about the whole situation just got twice as worse. Still, I'm not really the type to sportingly wait for the opponent to show off what he can do before springing into action, so I immediately began to chant a new spell.

"Elmekia Lance!"

Before either me or Aireus could make a move, Dilarl launched a spell from the back row. This incantation attacked the opponent's astral form directly, and was powerful enough to kill a lesser demon in a single blow. There was no way for Aireus, who looked like little more than a mass of skin growing out of the ground, to dodge something like that; the spear of light managed to score a direct hit. ave

The young man's expression did not change at all, though, and Narof's head next to him also continued with his 'yell and twist your tentacles'-routine. The skin where the Elmekia Lance connected simply peeled off and plopped to the ground like a piece of scab.

Narof's head began howling even louder—it felt like the space itself cracked around us. Numerous points of light appeared in the

air.

What—?

"Dodge!!" I warned the others, halting my incantation, and made a run for it. At the same moment, the lights sprang into motion, bombarding the ground in random directions. I narrowly managed to avoid a couple of them heading my way, and—

Boooom!

The fierce sound of an ear-splitting explosion echoed through the cave. I could feel an enormous amount of heat and steam rising from the ground around me.

"Is everyone all right?" I called to the others.

"I'm okay!"

"…Me too.."

"I am, for now." The three voices reached my ears.

It seems everyone made it, but… Aireus smacked us with something really powerful back there. It might have even been the Blast Bomb; a spell which, in simple terms, creates several hugely boosted Fireballs, and lets them loose all at once. The projectiles that missed and hit the lake instead were responsible for the steam.

Thanks to that, though, I could no longer see our opponents or anyone of our team either. It would've been good to say that the enemy wasn't faring any better, but since they weren't really human, it was hard to say for sure.

Oh, and to make things even more unfair for me, I lost my short

sword which I was using as a light source in place of a torch when we were swept away by the water and ended up here. Not that I could strike too many enemies down with it, but it was good for making a diversion.

Anyway, complaining about lost stuff is a waste of time.

For now, I chose to chant another spell.

Suddenly, the sense of great danger struck me, seemingly without reason and I by dove to the left by instinct. Something whizzed through the fog and grazed the edge of my right shoulder guard.

"Unnh!"

"Aah!" At the same moment, the yells of Gourry and Dilarl could be heard from somewhere nearby.

So, like I suspected, they were trying to use the fog for their tricks? Not so fast!

"Diem Wind!" My spell created a gust of wind that blew away the fog. And once visibility was back to normal… I was looking at Aireus, who finished some kind of transformation.

He was still a mass of skin rooted to the ground with a young man's face and Narof's head stuck on, but now he also formed dozens of arms. Okay, I say 'arms', but they actually looked nothing like human limbs—more like a withered tree branches. It was really bizarre, a long arm like that having so many joints.

Did he try attacking us in the fog with one of those just now?

Oh, and since we could see Aireus…

“Fireball!” Dilarl wasted no time to make his body burn.

Boom!

The same moment the spell exploded, Gourry dashed towards our opponent. Aireus reached with one of his limbs towards him.

“Haa!” Gourry struck the arm with his sword! I expected to see the severed limb fly through the air, but it was merely pushed aside with a clang. It was definitely stronger than it looked.

Also, the part of skin which was hit by the Fireball simply peeled off again, regrowing the same way it did when it was struck by the Elmekia Lance earlier.

So, the guy can regenerate most of his body like a lizard can regrow its tail? If so, there surely has to be a part of him somewhere that cannot be healed like that. That might be his weakness…

“Khyaaaaak!” Narof’s head simply couldn’t quit shouting.

Though its cry sounded little more than the howl of some beast to human ears, it was probably the chant itself for some kind of spell. The movement of those countless tentacles might have also been part of it.

Anyway, since we just found out that the enemy’s spells were nothing to sneeze at, I could not let him finish!

“Hell Blast!” Aria’s spell…

“Zelas Brid!” …and my own was fired at the same time!

Her blast broke off one of Aireus' arms and hit the young man's face, while mine zigzagged through the arms and smashed into Narof's head.

Woohoo! I stopped the chant!

Aireus' attack patterns did not change one bit, however. He kept Gourry at bay with five or six of his arms, also trying to attack Aria, Dilarl and me sporadically. Luckily he couldn't control his arms very well; their movements were so simplistic that even Aria could avoid them, even though she wasn't used to fighting.

As for the bad news, the young man's face which was hit by Aria's spell also peeled off, the new skin in its place gradually reforming into what it was before.

"It's useless…" Aireus murmured.

"I can't believe it…!" Aria couldn't hide her astonishment.

It's glaringly obvious that she has zero experience with all of this…

The way the young man's face was there, it was basically shouting 'Here's my weak point!'—but I don't think someone with such regenerative abilities would let his weakness get discovered so easily.

Oh, and Narof's head, which was hit by my spell, was growing back too. It regenerated more slowly than the other one, since it wasn't part of the original body, but there was no doubt that it'd be complete soon and would try casting more spells.

I'd rather finish this fight before that…

The guy's weak point was probably inside his body, however, normal attacks could only damage his skin, which would peel off and then regrow. But…

Wait a second… Maybe this spell would be…

Avoiding the attack of a couple of arms, I murmured an incantation, and—

"Blam Blazer!" The blue light of the boosted spell, strong enough to take down a lesser demon easily, managed to penetrate Aireus' body!

"Uaah… Aaaaaaaah!!" A death cry echoed throughout the underground lake. The withered branch-like arms dropped to the ground of the island, their strength lost. The spell I released had the ability to reach inside the opponent and do the damage there, instead of exploding immediately on contact like the others. I had hoped that I could nail his weak point with it—and I was right. Aireus' body collapsed on itself like a dried-out heap of earth.

"It seems like we took him down… somehow…" Gourry said with a quiet sigh.

"It sure looks that way." I nodded. "Well then, somewhere around this island, there must be a way to go up from here."

"Wait a minute," Dilarl dared to interrupt my lighthearted explanation, glaring at me. "That plan you talked about earlier… to find the route to the guild… it was *this*?"

"Yep," I answered lightly, ignoring his foul mood.

In more detail, I assumed that way to the guild would have

guards protecting it, who would no doubt attack us if we strolled by. All we had to do is to wander around the cave until that happened, and then we could be sure that we've found the passage.

"Are you insane?! How could think up such a reckless plan?!" Dilarl raged.

"Ah, relax. We all made it through alive, after all. ≡

"Why you…" The guy's clenched fists were trembling. Just before he could start an argument though…

"Ms. Lina!" Aria called me to a stone pillar she found at the center of the island. "Could this be it?"

She was showing me a hole under the column of rock. It definitely looked like it, but…

"It's too small…" Gourry murmured with an embarrassed look.

Yeah, while the whole looked pretty deep, it was so small that even I could barely crawl into it after removing my shoulder guards. No matter where it led, Gourry and Dilarl could not enter.

"I… don't think this is the one. That Narof guy was talking about a 'route', but he couldn't go through something this small, could he?" Dilarl suggested a logical explanation. It was definitely true that neither Narof nor the fish demons could pass through a narrow passage like this.

However… wait… Then maybe the way is…?

"Lighting!" Finishing the spell, I threw the sphere of magic light I made into the lake.

The bright light illuminated the water below, letting us see farther into it.

As I suspected, right under the island lay the gaping mouth of a huge underwater cave.

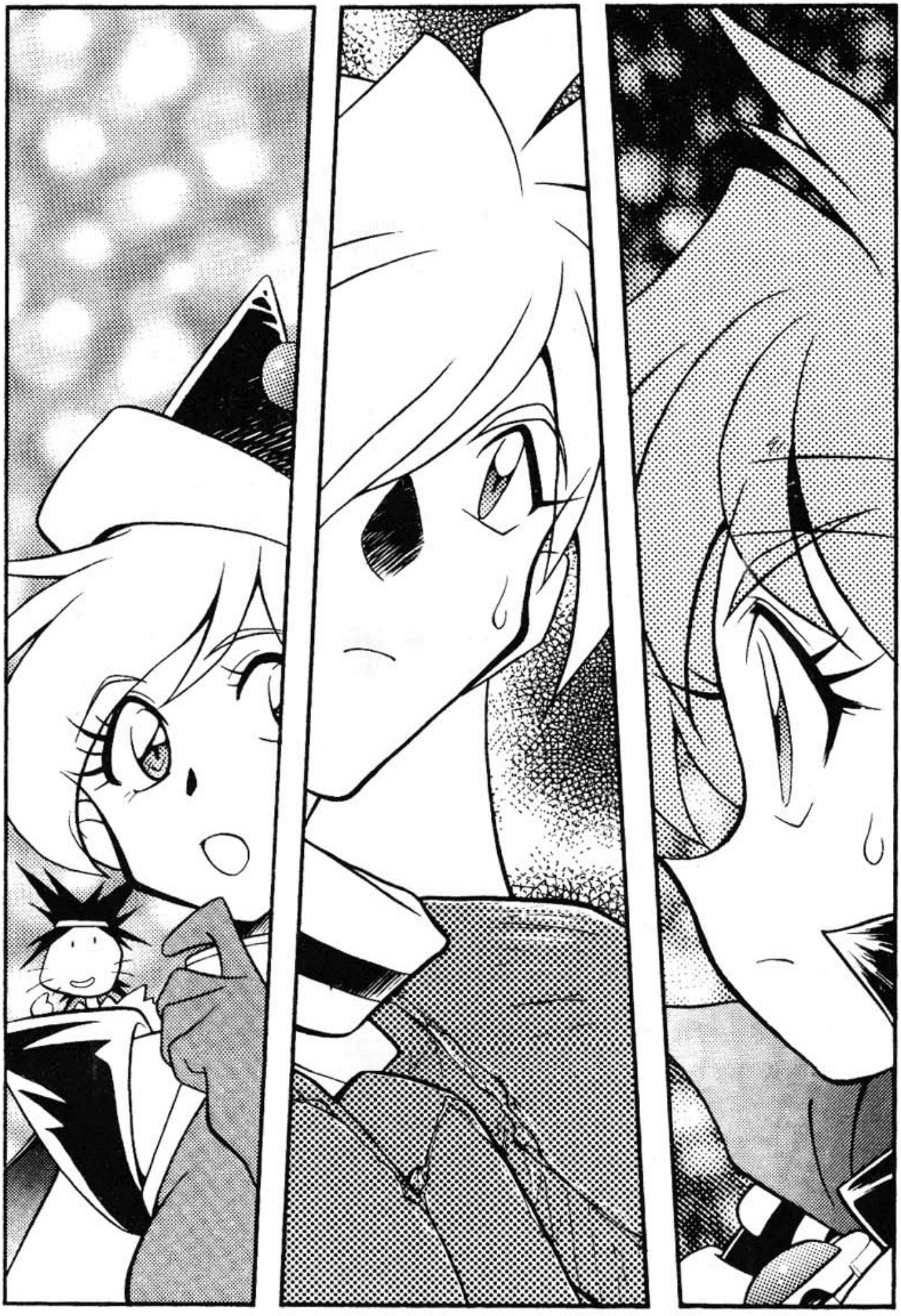
Drip… Drip…

The sound of dripping water repeated itself endlessly.

We entered the cave with Ray Wing, and after going for a while, the water receded revealing a path; so I released the spell, and we continued on foot.

If this really was the so-called ‘route’, it was reasonable to expect the enemy lying in wait for an ambush. It was especially likely since while we were fighting Aireus one of the fish demons fled, possibly in this direction, and could have told others about our arrival. So while it might have been faster to fly, walking like this was better in case we got attacked. Also, the fluorescent moss was there on the walls and the ceiling once again, so we didn’t need to have a light ready.

That said, though…



"…But… this is… way too long…" Gourry said in a tired voice, when we were walking for what it felt like ages. The ground was too wet to speed up our pace, and the scenery around us did not change at all, which made the trip seem even longer than it really was.

But even if all these weren't true, the passage was just really, really long.

Maybe we're walking under the bottom of the underground lake?

"I'm saying this now… If we keep walking and walking only to realize in the end that this isn't a passage but a simple cave, I'm going to die…" Dilarl spoke in a weary tone.

When we entered Crimson Town, the sun was about to set. We can't see up to the surface from here, so I can't tell what time is it exactly, but it should be in the middle of the night? That means, except for the brief time when the water sweeping us away knocked us out, we were moving around almost non-stop. If someone wouldn't be tired after this, that'd be inhuman.

Aria might have been the most exhausted: she hadn't opened her mouth since we entered the cave. Still, this wasn't the situation when we could afford a break. We had to infiltrate the enemy base and destroy their forces as quickly as possible.

Or, we can just blow up the whole Sorcerer's Guild with a Dragon Slave when we arrive?

I guess I'll think about that when we get there…

"I'm sure this is the passage," I spoke up again.

"How could you know that?" Dilarl asked in disbelief.

“Because this is a man-made road.”

“The road…? You mean this thing we’re walking on?” Gourry chimed in.

“Yes. Look at that.” I pointed above. “There are stalactites hanging from the ceiling. If the bottom would be natural, we could expect to find a couple of them rising from the floor too. But there aren’t any, which means someone cleared the way to make passing through easier. Also, it looks like we’re nearing our destination…”

I pointed with my eyes towards the end of the passage. There were jars both big and small lined up in a row on both sides.

“This part is being used for storage, which means the place has seen active use lately,” I explained. “By the way, Aria, have you ever heard about this basement passage when you were part of the guild?”

“Well… I know the basement is used for storage purposes… but because they’ve hired a person to keep the place in order… I’ve never been here…” she murmured. As expected, she seemed completely spent now.

Hmm?

If this cave and the basement are connected, shouldn’t there be at least a few rumors circulating about it? Unless, there is something here which they want to keep a secret?

I guess I’ll find out sooner or later.

While I kept walking deep in thought, more and more jars, some toppled over, and a couple of strange tools came into view. And finally…

“Looks like I was right.” With those words I stopped in front of a door. Yes, a metal door, which was really unusual to find at the end of an endless cave tunnel. It was unlikely that they put it here because they often passed by while mining or expanding the cave; the stones around it made it look like it was installed more as a quick fix.

There was no sign of any opponent beyond the door—although they might have just been good at concealing their presence.

“In a second… I’m going to push it open,” I warned the others.

Someone gulped loudly. Gourry silently unsheathed his sword to prepare against a possible surprise attack, while Dilarl started casting a spell.

I pushed my hand against the door.

“Ah. It’s locked. No surprise here.”

“Hey!” Dilarl blurted out, exasperated, stopping the incantation.

But really, a door like this being locked shouldn’t come as a shock to anyone. I examined it more closely.

“Hmm… Wait… It’s not locked, only bolted. Then…” I pulled out a thin knife hidden under one of my shoulder guards, and stuck it between the door and the frame.

Click.

A small metallic sound could be heard. It seemed like the bolt was released.

Good.

“Okay, now for real… let’s go.”

With a loud creak, the door slowly swung open towards the inside. No ambush came, for now.

However…

“Isn’t this place too small to be used for storage by the guild?” Dilarl murmured as he looked around.

“Besides, there are household items lying around…” I heard Gourry say, urging me to take a closer look at the dimly lit room myself.

As he said, cooking utensils and cleaning tools could be seen in the corner, and everything they stored here seemed entirely mundane. The room itself wasn’t bigger than that of a normal home, with an unlit lamp hanging from the ceiling.

What on earth… is this?

With no better idea, I chanted a spell. “Lighting!”

I raised the magical light up to the ceiling, but even well-lit, the room looked just like the basement of an ordinary house. Also, I spotted some stairs leading upwards.

“It feels like we’ve somehow ended up at the wrong place…”

“Ehehe, let’s head up the stairs first.” I laughed nervously at Gourry’s comment and started to climb.

At the end of the narrow, steep stairs, we came up to a door. It was locked, but I took out a needle I’d hidden near my chest, put it into the keyhole, and opened it without much fuss. Checking that

there was no one beyond it the best we could, I opened the squeaky door and found a corridor on the other side. I went in first, with Gourry, Aria and Dilarl following behind in order.

"This… this is not the guild," Aria muttered with an almost completely vacant expression.

Ah… So it really isn't…

Actually, it was a pretty awesome piece of masonry, but just seeing the structure made it obvious that this was nothing more than an ordinary house.

"Huh? What? Did we come here by mistake?" Dilarl asked.

"Does that mean that we need to keep going inside the cave for even longer?"

"Hmm… Looks like we have to…" I answered Gourry's question reluctantly.

We were about to turn around and head back towards the basement down the stairs…

"This is… Cairus' home."

…when Aria's quiet murmur stopped us in our tracks.

"Re… Really?" I asked, a bit skeptical.

"I'm certain it is," she answered with stubborn determination. "I might have only been here once, when answering my sister's summons right before Cairus' revolt… but I swear, I've been here before." With that, she began to march forward with large steps.

“Wait! Aria!” I called after her. “Where are you going?”

“To my sister’s room,” she answered without turning back. Instead of slowing down, she hustled even faster than before; we had no choice but to go after her.

We thought that the ‘route’ was a passage to the Sorcerer’s Guild, but in reality, it was connected to Cairus’ mansion. Of course, Narof might have realized our misunderstanding, but he had no reason to tell us about it.

Aria hurried through the mansion showing no signs of fear, even though enemies could have been hiding anywhere. Finally, she stopped in front of a door. With a deep sigh, she put her hand on it.

Before we could stop her, she swung the door wide open, and—

“Bell…” she murmured, her faint voice shaking.

Moonlight flooded in through the doors leading to the terrace.

Even without any other light, we could see a canopy bed and a tiny table in the large room; there was a rocking chair next to the bed as well.

And near the rocking chair stood a woman, who resembled Aria greatly. Long silver hair shone in the moonlight.

“Ari…a” she stuttered.

“Bell!” Crying out her sister’s name, Aria ran into the room and buried her face into her chest.

“Aria… How can you be here…?”

“I… I came here to save you! I’ve heard that because of Cairus’ revolt, the king’s army is coming this way and the city will be turned into a battlefield… so… so I came here to save you!” Probably because the reunion with her sister let her release the tension built up inside her, Aria’s voice quivered with tears.

Bell just softly stroked her sister’s hair, while gently moving her gaze towards us. “And you?”

“You could say we’re your sister’s bodyguards,” I replied. “But first thing’s first; we need to get you out of this place, the introductions can wait. We might be attacked any moment.”

“Y-Yes. Bell, come with us,” Aria asked her.

“That will not be allowed.” Suddenly, a familiar voice was heard from the corridor.

“Zonagain?!” I exclaimed while snapping my head back, and saw the short man with his hood pulled deeply into his face, wearing the same cloak as before.

Also, next to him stood another man—roughly 40 years old, with black hair. He wore a finely crafted cloak embroidered with silver thread and a talisman jewel, but the clothes did not fit his ugly-looking face at all.

Then… considering the situation, this man should be—

“Would you be the one named Cairus…?” I asked.

“Yes, I am he. I praise you all for making it this far… but here is where it ends. This place will be your grave.”

I didn't mull on his words much, just burst out laughing.

Cairus gave an unpleasant frown. "Is something wrong?"

"It's just that your speech was so cliché!" I made my stand in the center of the corridor, pointing a finger at him. "Your face already looks like a small-fry villain, and now you just blurted out the three most typical lines! Even a kid would laugh at you."

Cairus' eyebrow twitched, but he probably figured that if he got carried away I'd only make him look even more ridiculous. So he desperately fought to repress his anger, hissing, "Stop babbling nonsense. No matter how skilled you are, you will die here regardless!"

"Well… We'll see about… that!" I said while stepping towards the wall. At the same time—

"Fireball!" Dilarl, who had been chanting a spell behind me, let loose a sphere of crimson light!

Boooom!

With a great explosion, flame swept through the corridor. We evaded the spreading blaze by using the open door as a shield.

It was the same trick we used when fighting Narof down below. But now, because of the straight corridor, it was also impossible to evade the attack.

Then, however, an arrow of light emerged from the flames and wrecked our shield-door! I jumped quickly away from it, and started casting my own spell. As the smoke cleared, I spotted the figures of Zonagain and Cairus standing on the opposite end of the corridor.

How could they move such a distance so quickly?

No later than that thought formed inside my head, Zonagain was already closing in on me from the right, running through the corridor with a bizarre sound and extraordinary speed.

Out of habit, I quickly reached for the sword which normally hung from my waist, but…

A dull clang came from right above my head. It was Gourry, who blocked whatever attack was heading my way with his sword.

Those black… things…

They were the legs of a spider, reaching out from the old man's hunched back.

"Hmph. You're worthy of killing Graimore," said Zonagain, making a gap between us by scurrying backwards on his spider legs. He might have given up being a human, but he still wasn't keen on a close-quarters fight with Gourry.

Then…

"Blam Blazer!" I shot my spell—right behind my back, where a new source of bloodlust emerged!

The blue light nailed a woman dressed in green, who somehow appeared in the corridor without anyone noticing. Or so I thought, anyway—but instead, when the spell was about to hit, the woman released her own wave of azure light that spread through the room!

"Ugh!" Suddenly, my body was struck by intense pain.

That was… it lost a lot of power, but I'm sure that was Blam

Blazer! Did she reflect my spell back at me?

After the light had faded away, the woman in green was… no, wait… after looking at her the second time, I realized my mistake: she was not wearing green clothes, rather her whole body—face, torso, head, even hands and feet—was colored radiant green, like an emerald.

With someone like her on the field, the scales weren't exactly tipped in our favor. I really wanted to beat up Cairus then and there, but the current situation didn't make that easy at all.

"Everyone! To the room!" Shouting to Gourry and Dilarl, I lunged back into the room where the two girls were. "Aria! Bell! Let's get out of here!" I started chanting a spell.

Since it has come to this, we'll get Aria and the others outside, and then with a bigger spell I'll blow the building to smithereens, along with the enemy!

"Don't let them get away!" Cairus' voice was heard from the corridor. "Go after them! Zonagain! Mucale!"

Hearing this, Aria came to a halt. "W… What did he—?"

"What are you doing, Aria?! Come on!" yelled Dilarl, kicking the terrace doors open.

"Oh…" She started running once more.

Meanwhile, Gourry came face to face with Zonagain again, who abruptly appeared at the terrace doorstep. And then…

"Wait! Stop!" I called out towards Dilarl, but he, Bell and Aria

were already outside by that time.

They did stop when they heard me, but then… something that looked like a sickle pierced the right of Dilarl's chest.

Slowly, he collapsed, hitting the ground with a thud.

"Mr. Dilarl!!" Aria's desperate scream echoed through the building.

Gourry and I sprinted to the terrace. The instant we got there, something sliced through the night air, but Gourry swatted it aside with his sword.

I hugged Dilarl with one arm, while holding Aria's hand with the other. After confirming that Gourry was grabbing on to my shoulder, I released my finished spell.

"Ray Wing!"

We must clear out of here with that boosted Ray Wing *right now*!

But when the spell was about to take effect—

"Kyaaa!" Ms. Bell's scream hit my ears. When I snapped my head back, I saw some withered branch-like thing grasping her right leg.

Is that…?

"Bell!" Aria's hand slipped out of her sister's! "Take to the sky!" she declared while Bell fell out of the wind barrier just as it came into being.

The four of us took to the air, leaving her sister behind.

“Bell…!” Aria bit back another scream; she no doubt wanted to turn back and save her, but probably thought that Dilarl could not be left in such a condition for long.

However… in my arms, Dilarl’s body already began losing its warmth little by little.

I knew what that meant.

It’s like this… when a man dies.

In the ruins, there was only darkness, musty air, and silence.

None of us was willing to say a word, neither me, nor Gourry or Aria.

We managed to make a narrow escape from the air troops who were chasing after us and took refuge in these ruins to avoid detection. Considerable time had passed since then.

“I…” After what felt like an eternity, Aria opened her mouth to speak. “What… what have I done?”

She just droned the words without any emotion at all.

“I couldn’t… save my sister, and… because of me… Mr. Dilarl died…”

“It wasn’t your fault—”

“It *was* my fault!” she cut me short with a yell. “If my grip on her hand would’ve been stronger, I could have saved my sister! And if I hadn’t told him I wanted to go to Crimson, Mr. Dilarl… Mr. Dilarl

would not be…”

“When it comes to Dilarl… I’m the one to blame, not you,” I said with a self-mocking smile. “It was my plan, and it was me who didn’t recognize the attacker waiting outside the terrace.”

“The attacker…? Do you know who was there?” Gourry’s question came from the darkness.

I nodded, although I knew he couldn’t see me. “Maybe… It might have been Aireus… the one we fought at the underground lake.”

“He’s still alive?” Aria asked.

“He didn’t really survive; it might be better to say that what we killed down there was only part of him, not the whole thing… that’s my best guess, at least. When we flew away from Cairus’ mansion with Ray Wing, I managed to take a look at the building… the mansion was covered with something that looked like ivy… with some round blobs sticking out of it here and there.”

“Is that…?!”

I nodded to Gourry’s question again. “Yes… Aireus looked just like those. I think the guy’s composition is more like a plant than a human. His ‘parts’ are all connected to some kind of root in the basement.”

That was how along with the ivy, a presence covered the whole mansion as well, even though neither me nor Gourry noticed it until the last moment. Of course, it could have been another guy with the same ability as Aireus, but that sickle-like attack that struck down

Dilarl had the same shape as the fish demons' fins. Considering that one fish demon disappeared during the fight underground, it seemed more likely that Aireus used his ability to absorb it, rather than a person similar to him having that attack by simple coincidence.

And if this theory of mine is true, then he's going to be a really irksome opponent.

We had no idea what his weakness could be. Blowing up the whole mansion might have solved the issue, but even that was only a 'might'. If you bash someone's head in, he's dead, but there are plants which can grow back from their roots, or even from a single branch. Even if I incinerated the entire building, if Aireus shared abilities with plants like those, it was possible that he'd regenerate as long as even one piece of his body remained intact.

"Anyway," I continued, "these people annoy me to no end. I don't know how many abilities Cairus himself has, but even without him we have Aireus, the winged demons, Zonagain, that girl named Mucale, and—"

"About her… I want to have a word with you," Aria interrupted my catalogue of the enemy. "When I was in the guild… there was a girl there, who entered the association around the same time as I did. We became friends while working together on a research project… her name was Eridia Mucale."

"What?!" I exclaimed without thinking.

"And… I also remembered… among the people who managed the underground storage… there was a man whose name was Aireus…"

“What the…? Then these people were…” I trailed off in the darkness. Aria answered with nothing but silence.

“So Mucale and Aireus were Cairus’ followers?” I spoke up again after a while.

“No…” Aria replied. “I just heard Aireus’ name in passing, so I don’t know he was Cairus’ follower or not… but Eridia made no secret of how she abhorred him.”

“Umm, then what happened?” Gourry sounded confused.

I gave a small sigh. “That means… Cairus is controlling the members of the guild by turning them into his chimera slaves.”

“But… is that possible?” Aria said. “Cairus’ main field was the general application of magic, so he studied a lot of topics, from attack spells to healing magic and conjurations, magical equipment and also chimera technology… but as a consequence, he wasn’t very knowledgeable in any one of them. I can’t imagine Cairus having the skill to create chimeras like these…”

“So you mean there is yet another dark secret involved?” I commented.

“Yes, I suppose it’s possible… I just don’t know that much about Cairus. He could have a lot more knowledge on chimeras that I’ve never seen a sign of…”

“That’s true…” I muttered with uncertainty.

To be honest, from what his mansion looked like, I did not get the feeling that Cairus had been the type of person to study chimeras.

Those that do tend to have a pretty large laboratory in their basement—and no, that's not just me generalizing. To create chimeras, you need a large space to work in because of what's involved in the process, but you can't claim whatever room you want for yourself at the expense of fellow researches in the guild. Even if you put your laboratory there, in some cases other sorcerers working in the same field may steal the findings or the invented technology. Because of this, if someone researched chimeras with some market potential, it was normal for him to install a private laboratory under his house or somewhere else, to avoid anyone intruding on his work.

Of course, I did not look into every corner of Cairus' mansion. It's possible that there was an underground laboratory there which we didn't come across, or it could've been in a remote location, or to catch us off-guard, the laboratory might have been on the second floor…

Even if that was true, though, we still should have come across some trace or clue at least—but we didn't. And I don't think he could've used any guild equipment to turn all these people into chimeras either.

"So… Ms. Lina…" Aria began in a tiny voice. "About Eridia… Mucale… Is there any way to turn her back to normal?"

I couldn't give her an answer.

There's a person I know who was turned into a chimera by someone else and then wandered through the land to find a way to become human again. I didn't hear news of him at the time, but it seemed obvious that he's having a hard time with it.

Also, to quote yet another guy I know: ‘Even if you have a recipe to make fruit punch, you can’t simply remove the orange juice and leave in the apple.’

Besides, in Mucale’s case, we were definitely talking about mind control too. If she was only controlled through her spirit, we can solve the problem by defeating Cairus, but if they messed with her mind using brainwashing techniques…

“There’s no way… is there…” Aria’s whisper spread through the darkness.

“I can’t give you an exact answer since I don’t know enough about chimeras,” I told her, “but… it’s no simple thing, that’s for sure.”

“I… see…” She sank into silence once more.

“Well, how about we get some sleep?” Gourry spoke up, as if waiting for this moment. “The most important thing right now is to get our strength back. We want to settle this tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah… That’s the plan.” I said, nodding. “Aria, let’s get some rest, for now… And tomorrow… we’re going to save Ms. Bell and wipe Cairus off the face of the earth.”

We set out the next evening, as the last rays of the sun painted the ruins blood red. Our destination was Cairus’ mansion.

“How are we going to get there?” Gourry asked.

“We’ll use the canals and go under the water,” I replied. “If we go on foot we’ll be discovered by their air troops, and it’d be difficult to navigate underground—we would run into the same

problems as yesterday. In the water on the other hand, the number of fish demons has lessened after yesterday's fight, and Narof is gone. Our opponents probably thought about this too, but it's still a safer bet than travelling on the ground. From here, we will dig a tunnel through the earth to the canal… and after that we'll go right to Cairus' place. Aria, I'll need you to help us find our way around."

"Yes." She nodded resolutely.

I inclined my head as well in reply and started chanting a spell.

"They're coming!" Gourry warned as we were nearing Cairus' mansion. I could see something like an orange-colored light moving toward us.

What's that?

Aireus' tentacles. There were lots of them, and their sickle-like tips sliced through the wind barrier with a sharp noise. Holding onto me with his left hand, Gourry swung his blade in his right and blocked the attack. And right after that… Aira's spell materialized outside the shield!

"Freeze Brid!"

The water froze, hindering the movement of the sickle-tentacles. Though it was the same strategy Dilarl used against the fish-demons, I have to give Aria credit for remembering and using it.

"We're almost there, Ms. Lina!" she declared.

"Okay! Then we're going up!" I directed the spell, and the barrier breached the surface of the water, rising into the air.

Cairus' mansion was almost next to us. As we saw before, Aireus' ivy covered the building completely and there were a couple of flying opponents floating about here and there as well.

I didn't really care about them, but charged right towards the mansion instead. They chased us from behind, while Aireus' sharp-ended tentacles came at us from the front, so I was really eager to finally reach the building's terrace, but…

"Fireball!"

Aria's spell appeared behind the wind barrier… and went off.

Booom!

The explosion slammed into the shield!

"Woaaaahh?!" Shoved by the pressure, the wind barrier gained enormous speed, shook the tentacles off and crashed through some windows into the mansion.

Well… it was the same tactic I used yesterday, but still… that was a bit frightening, coming from you, Aria.

Anyway, I dismissed the spell and hopped down to the floor.

"Hey… Aria…" Gourry said with an embarrassed look as put a hand on my shoulder. "I'll just say this… if you follow her bad example, you won't be living the right kind of life. Be careful."

"What's that supposed to mean, Gourry?" I grumbled.

"Err, nah, it's not supposed to mean anything. Anyway, let's hurry."

I wanted to grill him a bit about his transparent denial but had to agree that this wasn't the right situation for chitchat.

We dashed into Ms. Bell's room as planned, but she was nowhere to be found. She might have been moved to another.

"Let's go!" I kicked the door in and ran into the corridor.

The question is, where did they move her?

"Aria! Any ideas where Ms. Bell might be locked up?"

"None!"

"All right, then we'll search this place from top to bottom!" Guided only by my intuition, I hurried towards one end of the corridor with Aria and Gourry behind me.

We kicked the doors open of all the adjacent rooms one by one until we found ourselves in the front hall. There, Zonagain scurried forth, moving silently on the spider-legs sprouting from his back.

"Well-well… Don't you think you're being overly violent?" he said.

I heard a creak from the gallery surrounding the hall, and saw Cairus descending the stairs with Mucale in tow.

"Haha… So you came again?" the sorcerer snickered. "But it looks like one of you is missing."

"Where's my sister?!" Aria shouted, angered by his words.

"Bell?" Cairus asked back. "I can let you know that she is in this mansion. Of course… you're not much wiser just by knowing that,

are you?

"We'll soon see who's wise and who isn't," I said, stepping forward. "Aria, keep your cool. It's our loss if we let ourselves be provoked by such a third-rate villain."

"What—?"

"Don't you think those are bold words…" Interrupting Cairus who was about to throw a fit, Zonagain spoke in a cold tone. "… especially coming from people who already lost one of their own?"

Aria wanted to scream something nasty at him, but I was faster. "I don't think all this wrangling is getting us anywhere."

"It is as you say. So then… here we go!" With that. Zonagain began closing in on us.

Gourry stood in his way, grasping his sword—but the moment he wanted to strike at the old man, Zonagain made a huge jump backwards, turned around in mid-air, and…

"Blam Blazer!" He released the spell he had been chanting, right towards… Mucale?

The green-colored woman's entire body flashed up with brilliant light.

"Huh..?!" A shockwave of light ran through Gourry, Aria and me. It was weaker than the original spell, but it still hurt.

This ability is… a bit too effective for my tastes…

Gourry came to a halt for a second, during which Zonagain landed behind his back, and without turning around reached with

two of his legs towards him. Gourry did not turn around either, but probably still felt the attack coming, as he took a step forward and avoided it; he then dashed straight at Cairus and Mucale!

Mucale blocked the way, and…

"Icicle Lance!" Cairus launched his spell into her back!

"Nnngh!" Struck by the spreading cold of the snowstorm emanating from Mucale, Gourry pulled back in a hurry.

She can even reflect spells like that?

So they are using Mucale's ability to reflect magic in all directions as their main weapon, while Cairus is just standing there to protect her from attacks if needed… Ha, I bet he's pretty comfortable with staying out of the front line.

This strategy of theirs, though, will be a tough nut to crack. If we use offensive spells, Mucale will absorb and reflect them back at us, but if we try a direct physical attack, Cairus will use his own attack magic on her to keep us at bay.

Of course, that doesn't mean there's no way to defeat them. Mucale already had problems reflecting the spells in their entirety—if we use magic which is powerful enough, it may overload and destroy her. The problem is that I don't know what 'powerful enough' means here. For example, if I pull a Dragon Slave out of nowhere, that would surely do the trick, but I can't use that spell in a place like this. On the other hand, I can give less powerful, but still potent magic like Dynast Brass or Zelas Brid a try, but if Mucale somehow manages to reflect *those*… well, such spells can take down

even a pure mazoku with a single blow. Their power would be lessened while spreading through the room in all directions, true, but even so, we would not last a second if hit.

Not to mention that Mucale used to be Aria's friend, so the thought of killing her doesn't sit all that well with me.

Maybe the best would be to target Cairus instead with a surprise attack, coming from multiple directions all at once…?

All right! Then…

"Gourry! Keep Zonagain busy!" I shouted.

"Got it!" he answered, turning around to face the old man.

Meanwhile, I kept my eyes on Cairus and Mucale and started chanting my next spell.

"So, it seems you want to fight me to the bitter end!" Zonagain blocked Gourry's blade with several legs. The moment the limbs and the sword connected, with a whistle, something like a sticky thread came out of Zonagain's mouth and covered the weapon!

"—Uh?!" Gourry was caught by surprise.

"Icicle Lance!" Standing next to him, Aria shot a spell at Zonagain!

His spider legs hastily took off from the floor, and he jumped above Gourry's head. The thread covering the sword was still there, so Gourry could hardly move it, which put him at quite a bit of a disadvantage. However…

Now!

I quickly ran toward the spot where Zonagain was expected to land. He saw me coming and hesitated for a second, unsure whether to defend against me or attack Gourry…

"Flare Lance!" At that moment, I released the spell I've been chanting while on the run, aiming at Cairus. Then I closed my mouth and held my breath.

Mucale quickly intercepted the projectile, absorbed it and fired it back in a wide shockwave towards me. I clenched my eyes shut.

Scorching heat filled the air around me—and around Zonagain as well.

"Aargh!" the old man's scream echoed through the room.

Yep, no kidding. My attack was not meant to catch Cairus off guard, but to catch Zonagain inside the rebounding shockwave. This spell called Flare Lance originally has the power to reduce the opponent to a pile of ash, but I held back with it a bit and Mucale's ability also diminished its power, so it only made my skin twinge.

But what if you inhale the same heat? I held my breath and closed my eyes, but Zonagain's painful looks told me that his lungs were getting the lava treatment right now.

But there was more: Gourry, avoiding the shockwave, appeared behind him—and his sword penetrated Zonagain's back.

"…Urgh!" He couldn't even scream anymore, only the spider legs on his back kept twitching. And finally…

"Dam Brass!" Aria's spell stabbed into him. She also wasn't hurt as she stayed out of the shockwave's range.

Shocking no one, that was all Zonagain could endure. His spider legs twitched two or three more times, and became still.

"Well, it looks like that's one down," I said, gazing at Cairus with a mocking smile.

"Damn…!" His expression was distorted by hatred—and also anxiety.

I looked around the room in a leisurely manner.

"It also seems like you're running low on allies. Neither Aireus nor one of your winged buddies showed up to help you during our fight… so, in other words, they only serve as defense from outside attacks, right? Then the only protection you have left is Mucale, whose only ability is to reflect spells… I think you better prepare for the worst, dear Mr. Cairus," I ended my speech in a wonderfully belittling manner.

Maybe this will prompt him to go outside, so he can call on Aireus or his troops in the sky for some extra firepower—which was exactly what I wanted him to do. The moment Cairus left the building, I could freely blast him with all those wide-range spells I wasn't able to use indoors, and end this fight in a jiffy!

However…

"Ku… huhu…" Cairus swallowed a chuckle, edging towards Mucale. "Would that be possible…? Do you dare to think that my… my ambitions could be brought to ruin by people like you?"

As he spoke, his right hand grabbed the back of Mucale's head.

What is he—?!

A strong, dull noise echoed through the hall. Green fragments flew in the air.

"—Eridia!!" Aria cried out.

Cairus crushed Mucale's head in his hands.

…what…

As her headless body began to collapse, Cairus embraced it from behind.

"Why the hell did you do that?!" I demanded.

"Haha, isn't it obvious? Because if I don't do this, I'll become confused." His words made no sense to me whatsoever. Even his eyes started to lose focus, like he was going plain mad.

I don't know what he plans on doing, but…

"The body!" Gourry shouted. He was the first one to notice the unexpected event, I couldn't spot it until I followed his gaze which was fixed on Cairus.

Then I realized: in his embrace, Mucale's body was slowly sinking *into* Cairus' form.

Is he… is he absorbing Mucale?

Does that mean Cairus himself isn't a human either?

Eventually, Mucale's body completely disappeared within.

"Kuahahahahaa!!"

Nothing but Cairus' insane laughter filled the air…

Crimson—When the Puppet Play Comes to an End

"Freeze Arrow!" Aria's yell drowned out the violent laughter.

Hey, wait a sec—!

Cairus showed no signs of dodging, simply let the ten or so frozen arrows to rain down upon him. And then—like Mucale did before, he sent a wave a chilling cold towards us.

Well, it wasn't much of a chilling cold, more like cool wind, to tell the truth.

"As I thought…" Aria said, a bit crestfallen.

Ah, right. She let out a weakened Freeze Arrow to test whether Cairus absorbed Mucale's ability.

"Kuahahaha! Useless! Haven't you realized that Mucale's power is mine? Such hopeless attacks from people like you will no longer have any effect on me!" Having no idea that we were testing him, Cairus kept gloating in a loud voice.

In the end, he really is just a third-rate villain.

We couldn't assume that he only absorbed Mucale alone. No, on the contrary, it was only natural to expect him to have all of sorts of special abilities stolen from his other subordinates… huh?

In that moment, a question flashed through my mind—but I did not have time to think about it.

For now, the biggest question is how to defeat him…

"I'm telling you now, it was not only Mucale I had absorbed!" Cairus parroted my thoughts. "I'll show you!"

He let out a beast-like howl, a dozens of Freeze Arrows appeared out of thin air.

This is the lesser demons' power!

Without hesitation, Cairus guided all the arrows to strike him as soon as they came to being.

Damn it!

The second wave of cold spread quickly, sending a pulse of pain through our skin.

"Ugh!" Gourry groaned in a low voice as he grasped his sword and ran at our enemy. Cairus took a step back, however, and howled once more.

"Khyaaaak!"

Another storm of cold fell upon us!

This man… really knows how to use his skills!

If he simply sent the Freeze Arrows directly at Gourry, he could have parried them with his sword or dodged them. But by changing them into a shockwave of freezing wind, Gourry was helpless to do anything about it.

Of course, as the wave expanded, its power fell to next to nothing, but what if he kept doing this constantly? We'd start to lose

body heat, if only a little, and our movements would get slower and slower without even realizing. If he sent a couple of Freeze Arrows at us in such a state, maybe even Gourry would fail to avoid them.

This Cairus… judging from his way of talking and his strength of character he may look third-rate, but one can still call him a pretty good magician.

Looks like we need to think about another strategy for the fight as well.

"Gourry, Aria! Come here!" I called, running to corridor which was connected to the hall. "Aria, give me a hand!"

After explaining the plan to her, we started chanting a spell together.

"Are you trying to escape! It's of no use!" Cairus chased after us with some sick excitement in his voice.

And then…

"Dam Brass!" I released my spell—my target was not Cairus, but the ceiling above him!

Booom!

The ceiling collapsed, sending stone debris both big and small pouring down on him.

"Tsk! How meaningless!" Cairus avoided the debris by moving back, then made his way through the cloud of dust in the air. He passed over the stone pile which blocked the corridor and started nearing us again, but…

“Dam Brass!” At my signal, Aria shot the second spell, which smashed into the ceiling as well.

Now the dust filled the corridor entirely.

“What are you doing?! You’re starting to annoy me!” Voicing his complaints, Cairus took a step back once more, while Aria and Gourry withdrew further into the corridor.

“Dam Brass!” Again, Aria’s spell struck the ceiling.

“Damn it! You’re so persistent!” Looking impatient, after Cairus moved back to avoid the stone debris, he leaped quickly on top of the pile to continue his chase.

That was the moment I’ve been waiting for.

“Ragna Blade!” Responding to the Power Words, the sword of darkness emerged within my hands.

Try reflecting this!

“Huh?!” Cairus heard my voice coming from nearby, but could not see anything through the dust cloud, so he quickly released another beast-like cry and absorbed the arrows—just like I thought he would. His body shone up with brilliant light, and the magic wave swept through the corridor in both directions.

At that moment… I made the jump down.

I struck with the sword of darkness the moment I was right above Cairus’ head.

“What?” He finally realized what was happening and looked up, but it was too late! The black blade silently lodged itself deep into

his body.

When Aria hit the ceiling on my signal with Dam Brass, I flew up to hole in the ceiling using Levitation. As I hoped, there was a similar corridor on the next floor as well. As Aria and Gourry ran on the first floor, I ran with them on the second while casting Ragna Blade. Next, Aria's second Dam Brass blew a new hole into the ceiling and also into the floor of *my* corridor, and I attacked Cairus the moment I leaped off.

"Ah…?" From one moment to the next, Cairus turned pitch black—and his entire body burst apart.

The large amount of dust gradually settled down, revealing Gourry, Aria and me standing there.

"We… did it?" Aria asked.

I gave a nod. "As far as Cairus is concerned, yes."

"Then—"

"But we're not off the hook yet," I interrupted her. "There are still enemies left. We have no idea how the people who were controlled by Cairus will act now."

There was Aireus, who was literally stuck to the mansion from the outside, those human-like winged things, and let's not forget about the flying lesser demons either. Not to mention that these were only the ones we've come across until now; Cairus no doubt has other forces under his command.

Since the mage was down for the count, the best scenario would be if his control spells would dissipate… but if they don't, his

underlings might keep attacking us still, as we are obviously his enemies. I don't need to explain how annoying it'd be if that happened.

"We need to see what the deal is with our remaining foes before rescuing Bell," I stated. "If we go in and save her only to face an all-out attack the moment we set foot outside the mansion, all our efforts could be wasted… By the way, can your sister use some attack spells?"

"No… not at all…" Aria mumbled in confusion. "…my sister…"

"Okay, so she can't use offensive magic, right?" I tried to push the conversation along.

"No, actually, she doesn't know anything about magic at all," she said. "I became interested in magic when I was little and went to the Sorcerer's Guild, but Bell loved cooking and often helped out in our parents' small restaurant instead."

"All the more reason to check out the situation outside first. We can start with heading into one of the adjacent rooms and take a look out the window." With that, I opened the nearest door.

It seemed like a bedroom similar to the one where Bell had been. We could see outside through the terrace windows—I could not make out any enemies nearby. I couldn't feel any bloodlust or even hostility around us either.

"What do you think, Gourry?" I asked.

"I can't feel anything either…" he replied. "Anyway, I'll go

outside. Stay here."

"Okay. Be careful."

His sword at the ready in his right hand, Gourry opened the terrace door with his free one. He spent some time again checking if anyone was nearby, then ran out to the terrace and looked around the mansion.

"Ah…" Gourry gasped with both astonishment and horror.

"What happened?!" I asked, alarmed.

"No… the guy… A-Anyway, come here."

Aria and me glanced at each other and cautiously headed to the terrace. We turned our gaze to where Gourry was looking…

"…Uh?"

"Is this…?" Our reaction was the same as his.

Aireus' ivy covered the mansion completely, and among it, there were these huge masses of skin protruding here and there… but now, each of them seemed withered. The round blobs of skin were rustled by the wind, making a noise like dry fallen leaves, as if the whole thing was a huge, desiccated flower. Even the ivy-like vines turned to a brown color, looking entirely lifeless.

"Is he dead?" Gourry murmured in a quiet voice.

Deep silence descended upon us.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to me. "No way…!"

I crossed the room again and ran into the corridor. Gourry and

Aria followed behind.

"What's wrong, Ms. Lina?"

"One moment!" I told her. "There's something I have to check."

I stopped by the room through which we got in—where we met Ms. Bell yesterday. I couldn't say anything, just stood there, my feet rooted to the spot.

Beyond the terrace, that human-shaped, winged something-or-other, who was leading the flying demons, laid sprawled on the ground like a doll. There weren't any winged demons in sight either.

"What's going on?" I heard Gourry mutter from the back, but obviously, I couldn't give him an answer.

"It's because Cairus died, isn't it…?" Aria mumbled unsurely.

Yeah, that'd be a likely reason considering the circumstances, but… while I can't say that it's impossible to make a chimera that will die the moment someone else dies, there must be some pretty complicated methods involved.

"But why would Cairus do such a thing?" I objected.

"Well, it's because…" Aria considered my question for a second. "Maybe he could not stand the thought that if any disaster occurred his subordinates might outlive him, or… perhaps he made them like that so they had no choice but to help him. Yes, that must be the reason!"

"Hmmh…" I let out a doubtful grumble.

I guess her reasoning did make sense for the situation, but…

something… something weighed on my mind.

“Hey! Wait!” I don’t know if he was listening to our conversation or not, but Gourry suddenly sounded very nervous. “If this Cairus guy wanted to take all his people with him… what about Ms. Bell?”

My gaze met Aria’s, and we frantically ran into the corridor.

“Bell! Bell!”

“Ms. Bell, answer me!”

“Heeey! If you’re safe, please say something!”

The three of us kept shouting like that as we searched through the mansion. To tell the truth, I expected to meet a couple of guards on the way, but there wasn’t any. Only the sound of our voices echoed through the seemingly deserted building.

We checked everywhere on the first floor, but Ms. Bell was nowhere to be found.

“Bell… oh, no…”

“Don’t give up yet, Aria!” I tried to keep her from panicking. “Let’s head to the second floor!”

“Okay…”

We ascended the stairs in the front hall, and opened the nearest door we could find. It swung open with a creak… and we came to a halt for a second.

The window in the room was wide open, with the white lace

curtain swaying gently in the cool wind as if swimming on water. There was a rocking chair set up near the window, and…

"Aria?" Sitting in the rocking chair, Bell glanced at us over her shoulder, with a forlorn smile on her lips.

"Bell!!" With a cry, Aria ran to her sister. Bell stood from her chair and embraced her softly. "Bell… Bell…"

"It is over…" she said in a small voice as she brushed Aria's hair, who buried her head into her sister's chest and sobbed.

"Yes…" Aria spoke in a weak voice. "We defeated… Cairus… The town will be peaceful… and I can live with you again…"

Ms. Bell didn't answer, but gazed into the distance, almost like she was trying to remember something which she had lost long ago.

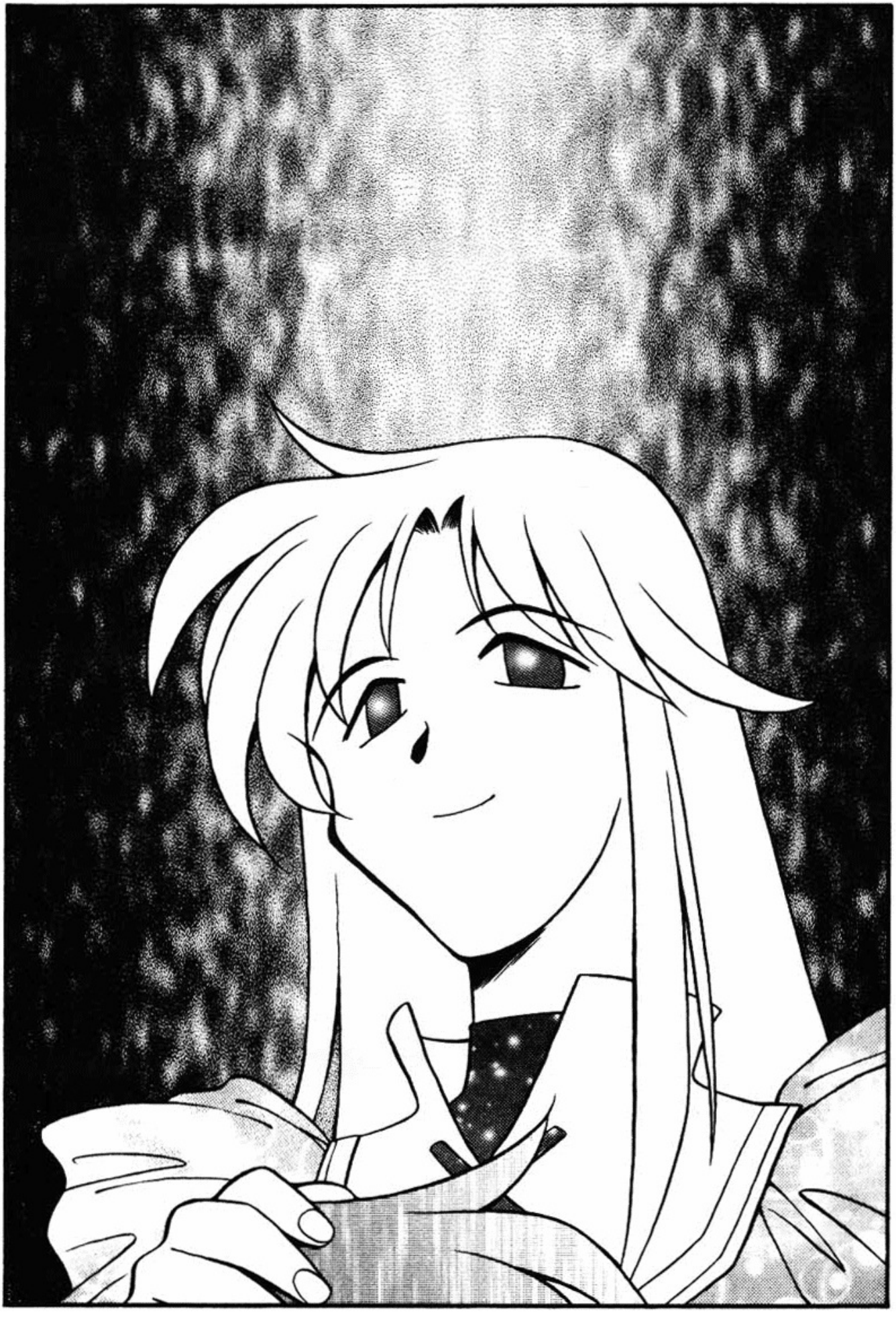
"This mansion… Is no one else here?" I asked her.

"Yes. Everyone had disappeared when the revolt started," Bell replied, her eyes still staring somewhere far away.

I was starting to feel uncomfortable since it looked like I was butting in on their sisterly reunion, but there was something I had to make clear.

"But… Ms. Bell, are you alright?" I spoke cautiously. "Cairus made even himself a chimera…"

Hearing my question, Aria's head snapped up. "That's right… Bell, are you okay? Didn't Cairus do anything strange to you?"



Her sister answered while smiling softly, “I’m all right, Aria. It wasn’t Cairus who made them like that, but me.”

At that moment, no one could really understand a word of what Bell just said.

“B-Bell?” Aria whispered hesitantly. Her sister merely looked at her with the same soft smile.

And then, I realized. The look in Bell’s eyes wasn’t forlorn, more like… crazy.

“What are you… talking about?” I asked in a hoarse voice.

“Cairus… deserved such a fate,” she answered, not looking me in the eye. “He deserved to suffer the disgrace of a traitor… to lose his honor… and to lose his life as well. It was only fair… to me. Cairus deprived me of him… deprived me of happiness.”

“Then… Cairus really did kill him?” Aria asked with surprise.

By ‘him’, are they referring to Bell’s fiancé?

“Cairus never told me that… but… I could not imagine any other way.” Bell replied. “So I… changed everyone… along with Cairus… I made him create the revolt… so he would die in disgrace.”

“I-I don’t know what you’re saying… Bell… Change? What do you mean…?”

“I… Aria, I felt like I gave up everything. I thought I resigned myself to my fate to the point when even feeling sad about it would have been meaningless to me. But it wasn’t… I thought I gave it all up… but hatred built up within me little by little. So I changed

everyone… in Cairus' name. I made him create this revolt."

"That's a lie!" Aria shook her head desperately. "You have to be lying! Or else… or else it'd mean it was you who I fought against, Bell!"

"I love you… Aria… You are my only sister… but…" Bell's smile became dreary. "After he died… Cairus proposed to me, and I savagely rejected. But one day… he visited me and said: wouldn't I be bothered if my younger sister… would meet the same fate as my fiancé?"

Aria's form trembled silently; I could not see her face from where I've been standing.

"That made it certain to me… it was Cairus who killed him, like I thought. Although, looking back now, he might have told me this only to make me agree, but… at that time, all I could think of was that I cannot let Aria die, so… I had no choice but to obey him."

In the end, this guy really was the worst kind of scum.

"L-Lies…"

"This is not a lie, Aria…" Bell shook her head slightly. "And because of what happened… I love you, but at the same time…"

She has come to hate her as well.

She sent Aria away because she loved her. She did not want her to get involved in the fight.

She also sent her away because she hated her. She wanted her to feel guilty about leaving her sister alone in the town and also used

Aria to spread information about Cairus leading the revolt.

So, could it have actually been Ms. Bell who dispatched Zonagain to spy on Aria?

Yes, with this, a lot of things finally begin to make sense. If Bell's goal was to make Cairus meet his end in disgrace, after his death his subordinates were no longer needed. In fact, if his men continued to fight, that could have posed a problem—so she made all of them die. But… how?

"You're lying!" Aria cried out in a shaky voice. "It's a lie! All of it! I can't believe that you could've done such a thing! You don't even know anything about magic at all! There's no way you could… transform everyone like this! It's impossible!"

"Yes… I know nothing about magic. After I married Cairus, he kept me from studying it… perhaps he was afraid of what I could learn and use against him for revenge. Even though I hated him more and more, I was powerless to do anything… until a person came and gave this power to me."

"A person?" I murmured with brows furrowed. It sounded like this 'person' was neither her dead fiancé nor Cairus…

Bell possibly heard me, as she, still wearing the same smile, continued her explanation to her sister: "I've never been told what my benefactor's name was… But this person realized I wanted power and lent some to me. With it, killing Cairus would have been so simple… but I wouldn't have been satisfied with only that. And so, I made up my mind to strip him of his honor by painting him as a traitor. I used this power to change everyone and also to control

them.”

“Lies! This doesn’t make any sense! It can’t be possible!”

“It *is* possible, Aria…” said Bell. “In the end, it will only be truly over if I die… along with everyone else here…”

“—Aria!” I ran to the girl and grabbed her arm, pulling her away from Bell as hard as I could. After what she said, it looked awfully like Bell might try to kill her sister—although for now she just stood there without any kind of concealed weapon, as far as I could tell.

“That’s a lie! Bell!” Aria was nearly crying.

Bell moved her gaze from her to me and Gourry. “I’m sorry for involving you two in something like this… but it’ll soon be over. No matter what kind of a man Cairus was, I know it was not right to drag people into such a matter who had nothing to do with it… thus, I deserve to die too. But I *must* stigmatize Cairus as a traitor… so… you two have to die as well…!” She glanced back at her sister, and silently lifted her right hand. “Aria… look at this. This is the… the power I received. Come to me… Dulgofa.”

What?!

The moment those words left Bell’s mouth, a haze of darkness materialized within her right. The darkness then abruptly solidified, turning into a jet black rapier.

“H-Hey, Lina! That’s…!”

“I know!” I snapped at Gourry in a cold tone that surprised even me.

I remember that name, and that sword. The dark blade, Dulgofa, is a mazoku itself, and was wielded by a certain high-ranking one under Dynast's command, General Sherra. Gourry and I also had the opportunity to see someone who touched it get morphed into a bizarre form.

Right… If she used that sword's power, 'changing' all these people could not have been very hard.

"Bell! Please stop!" Aria pleaded.

"Let us… get this over with…" her sister mumbled, her right hand already changing shape, fusing with the dark sword…

"I won't let you do that!" Gourry shouted, running towards Bell. The blade in his hand struck—he probably tried breaking Dulgofa to stop the assimilation, but…

With a sharp noise, the sword in Bell's hand effortlessly blocked the blow.

"Wha…?" Gourry took a huge leap back with a surprised yell.

It's no exaggeration to say that his skill with the sword was among the best there is—so if someone managed to block a full-powered attack from him, that person either somehow had to be even more skilled than him, or had to have something like Zonagain's multiple arms.

I couldn't really imagine Bell knowing that much about sword-fighting…

"It's much too late…" she said. "The sword was already within me… though it wasn't a perfect merge yet, I was already close to

becoming one with it. I don't know anything about fighting… but Dulgofa *does*."

The blade started sliding into Bell's palm, like it was being absorbed—and then her extended right arm turned dark. From there, the darkness gradually spread through her entire body as well.

There was no stopping it now.

Ms. Bell entire form became pitch black. She had become… completely one with Dulgofa.

"Bell!" Aria's cry filled the room in vain.

Earlier, when Dulgofa fused with a man in front of our eyes, it did so against the person's will. The result of that merge was a deformed, huge lump of flesh. But now… she *accepted* it by her own will. Already, I couldn't really tell if the woman standing before me was Bell or Dulgofa.

Is this the perfect form a merge with the sword can take?

Judging from appearances, it was similar to Mucale, who we fought just now. Only where Mucale's entire body took on the appearance of a shining, clean emerald, hers was nothing but hopeless, solid black.

Like the statue of a dark goddess…

"Bell…" Aria spoke her sister's name. In reaction, the woman silently pointed her right hand towards her.

"Watch out!" In the same moment, Gourry dashed to the girl, took her into his arms and ran.

With a dull thud, the wall behind where Aria had been standing was collapsed by an unseen force.

This is bad!

"Gourry! Let's get out of here!"

"Got it!" Hugging Aria, he hurried after me into the corridor.

"Bell! Bell!!" Grief filled the girl's voice as her yell rang through the room.

There's no helping it… At this stage, there's no way we can return Bell to the way she was…

We have no choice… but to bring her down.

No, we have to bring her down, but not in front of Aria. That'd be more than cruel.

"Gourry, let's go outside for now!"

"Okay!"

We headed straight down the stairs, blasted the front door open with a powerful kick and went out of the building.

"Aria, head into the town and find a place to hide!" I told her to go deeper into the city since the surrounding garden wasn't exactly full of hiding spots, with only a couple of trees planted here and there.

"What are you going to do…?"

I could not answer her. Seeing my reluctance, Aria dropped her gaze.

"It looks like… It looks like there's only one thing you can do… right?… I understand… Please do what you can…" she muttered, squeezing the words out. "Mr. Gourry… I'm… okay now… I can walk by myself."

"If you're sure about it…" He put Aria down gently.

"For now… let's go into the town together."

"Okay." She nodded to my offer.

While I was worried that she'd insist on trying to persuade her sister, she seemed to have resigned herself into accepting what was

to happen.

Before we left the garden however… I could feel a murderous presence approaching.

“Aria!” As she ran right next to me, I quickly shoved her to the side.

In the next moment, without any sound or wind, something passed by between the two of us—and a branch of a garden tree in the distance was blown to pieces.

I skidded to a halt, turned back, and saw the woman’s figure slowly strolling down from the entrance of the mansion.

It seemed like this wasn’t the time to try hiding Aria somewhere safe after all—the woman was targeting her specifically. Maybe as Bell fused with Dulgofa, she brought the conflicting love and hatred she nurtured with her and her horrible obsession persisted? If so, then even if she’d let us hide Aria somewhere, she would still stop at nothing to track her down.

“Looks like we have to settle this right here…” I said.

“Yeah… Seems that way.” Gourry and I stopped trying to withdraw, and turned around to face her.

“Aria, step back a little!” I warned. “But don’t get too far away from us either!”

“I understand!”

After making sure that everyone knew what to do, I began chanting a spell in a hurry.

The woman pointed at us with her right hand again. Is she aiming for me this time?

I kept the chant going while quickly jumping to the side; an invisible presence passed by me. So, she figured that I was an obstruction to her desire to kill Aria and decided to take me out first?

As her attack flew by, she was already on the run towards me—and my spell was complete.

"Swightflang!" In answer to the Power Word, a thick fog emerged around us.

This spell was normally used to aid an escape, but it could also help to make invisible attacks visible; I already saw someone using this strategy before. The enemy's attack leaves a cavity in the mist, and that makes it possible to see where it's heading.

The woman raised her arm again. I was struck by a sense of foreboding and hastily dodged to the side once more. The loud noise of impact hit the air somewhere far behind me.

No way… She can zap someone without making the air move at all?

How could such a power even exist?

Although I could easily avoid these blasts since my opponent wasn't attacking me continuously, and so I could anticipate them without much trouble… honestly, this ability was disturbing.

Gourry blocked the woman's way as she came near, while I cast another spell behind him.

“Haa!” Gourry cried out, and swung his sword at her. Metallic clangs filled the air as each of his attacks were met with a solid defense. No one noticed until now, but she was holding a dark dagger in her right hand.. well, it was a bit longer than a dagger, but still shorter than a real sword. She must have summoned it the instant she blocked Gourry’s attack.

The woman met Gourry blow by blow; their skills were nearly equal, but her stamina likely far exceeded that of a human.

She’s… proving to be a really tough opponent.

Luckily, to fire her invisible attack, it seemed like she had to stop and concentrate; at least judging from how she refrained from using it while in melee.

As that thought flashed through my mind, the spell chant was finished. Expecting this, Gourry leaped back to create a large gap between him and her.

All right! Now!

“Dynast Brass!” I released my spell immediately!

Bolts of lightning struck the center of the pentagram that appeared below the woman—but then her whole body appeared to shake for a moment and was surrounded by black fog. The darkness neutralized my magic with mind-blowing ease.

Not bad! Well, in that case…

I quickly cast another spell while Gourry tried to divert the woman’s attention from me. The dagger in her hand blocked a swing from the side; Gourry immediately pulled his sword back and

stabbed.

Just as quickly, however, another dagger emerged from the woman's left hand, and she caught the blade between her two weapons. Then, with Gourry's sword trapped like that, she closed in on him!

"Ugh!" He quickly backed away; and while the two of them were going back and forth from attack to defense, I managed to complete my newest spell. Not a second later, Gourry took another great leap back; he really knew the timing of my chants like the back of his hand!

"Zelas Brid!"

A beam of light sprang forth of my finger, quickly approaching our opponent. She saw it coming, and moved away from its path with a half-step; Gourry took advantage of this and charged at her, but his strike was blocked by her left-handed dagger with a clang. That maneuver froze her in place for a moment.

Yes! That's just what I've been waiting for!

The Zelas Brid's ribbon of light I called forth had the ability to change directions freely according to the will of the caster. Also, this attack spell draws its power from one of the high-ranking mazoku, Greater Beast Zelas Metallium; if I could score a direct hit or Dulgofa, the mazoku would be in trouble!

Although the beam already passed by the woman, on my command it abruptly changed directions and sped towards her once more!

Gotcha!

No sooner I thought that, though, without hesitation she struck with the dagger in her right hand towards the incoming spell, and…

What?!

Her blur of a strike effortlessly bisected the ribbon of light! The two halves zigzagged through the air uncontrollably, their power lost.

"Ugh!" Gourry tried to avoid the out-of-control remains of my spell, and lost his balance for a second.

Damn! Against her, even such a short moment can be critical!

Continuing the same movement she cut the beam with, the dagger in the woman's right sped towards him!

Gourry crouched down on his left leg while kicking his opponent with the right.

And just from that… she got knocked to the ground with a thud.

"Huh, what?" Gourry mumbled. The whole situation was so awkward, he stopped his attack altogether.

Yeah, it didn't seem like he managed to trip her by catching her off guard at all; it looked a lot more like she got tripped almost by mistake like a clumsy rookie.

Is she—?

"Gourry! She might have weak footwork!" I yelled my rough idea to him.

Ms. Bell said that Dulgofa knows how to fight, but… why did the woman summon those blades into her hands? If she wanted to extend her reach, she could have made her arms themselves longer, so why didn't she do that?

My guess was: Dulgofa only knows how to fight as a sword.

And if my hunch was correct, beating her won't be so hard at all!

"I'll give it a try!" Gourry said as he regained his balance, launching a sliding kick towards her legs.

Again, with almost absurd clumsiness, the woman plopped to the ground.

"Sorry, but you're going down!" Gourry swung his sword at her as she lay there.

A loud clang rang through the area.

"Wha—?!" we all yelled—well, except our opponent.

She did not block the strike with a dagger, Gourry's blade did reach her chest, but… it was kept from doing any damage by the pitch-black skin.

Without another word, Gourry quickly took a step back.

I should have seen this coming. If the dagger she created is part of her, and she just uses it because that's the only form Dulgofa can work with… then it's not so surprising that her whole body had the same hardness as those knives.

Gourry's sword didn't have a name, but it still held a lot of magic power within—and yet it seems the blade still doesn't work

on her.

"W… What now, Lina?" he asked, apparently out of ideas.

"What now, he tells me…"

"Can't you make this sword stronger with your magic?"

"That's not an option!" I rejected his request in a firm voice. There actually is a spell that gives magical power to a mundane weapon, making it able to destroy things it previously couldn't - but I couldn't even imagine what would happen if I used that on a sword that's already enchanted. It could become stronger if the spell and the enchantment successfully fuse with each other, it could respond badly and become weaker if the two magics cancel each other out, or, in the worst-case scenario, the two powers may interfere with each other and go out of control with a huge explosion.

Trying something as risky as that was not something I wanted to do.

Meanwhile, the moment the woman scrambled to her feet, she spun around and ran towards the mansion entrance.

"Is she trying to run away…?" Gourry asked.

"Let's go after her!" I told him.

Normally, if an opponent gets enough of fighting and wants to flee, I wouldn't necessarily give chase—but she was a being that contained Dulgofa, while also carrying the obsession of Ms. Bell within, so I doubted she would give up so easily. She might have ran off now, but she'd come after Aria and us later. And honestly, I'd rather take a dozen brass demons head-on than be hounded by

someone like her.

Also, would her animosity be limited to only the three of us? She didn't say, but what if she's got fed up with the world in general? It's not like it didn't happen before: she transformed all the people in the guild using Dulgofa's power without giving a damn about who they were.

We had to stop her—this woman, or whatever she had become—right here, right now.

"What about that black blade?" Aria's voice came from the back. "If you could use the sword you defeated Cairus with, Bell could be—"

"That's iffy," I interrupted. "I don't have the ability to catch up with her movements."

Her footwork was weak, true, but she could handle the sword nearly on the same level as Gourry. If I charged at her, I could run into a blow before getting the chance to trip her.

It wasn't just that, either; what worried me more than anything was that the spell drained too much magic power. Since I used it on Cairus just now, my reserves were running low; if I chanted it one more time, I could keep the blade of darkness going only for a few moments.

The question was how many strikes I can squeeze into that—I wasn't sure I could land a hit in such a short time.

The woman passed through the front door and ran inside the mansion with us following behind.

She stopped at the center of the hall. Next to her, Zonagain's body lay crumpled to the floor—he was already dead.

With a dull noise, the dagger in her right hand penetrated the body.

What is she doing?

I didn't have the time to wonder, as she withdrew her weapon and faced us again.

Does she…? No…. No way…

"Stop!" Hearing my warning, Gourry and Aria came to a halt at the door.

And then…spider legs burst forth from the woman's back.

Gaaah, it's just like I feared!

"Fall back!" I shouted.

"O-Okay!"

"You won't hear me complain!" Aria and Gourry replied. We turned around in a hurry and dashed outside, when…

"Freeze Arrow!" The voice coming from behind our backs wasn't very clear, but it was Ms. Bell's beyond doubt.

"Scatter!" The moment we got out of the building, we split according to my directions, moving to the left and right to avoid the swarm of icy arrows that passed between us.

Daaah, it's truly for real!

We moved away from the door and jointly started running.

Instantly, we could feel a presence closing in and turned around again—the woman was right behind us.

"W… What do we need to do? Lina!" Gourry shouted, his hand on his sword.

An irritated yell was all I could manage. "I have no idea either!"

"No idea?" he echoed.

"She seems to have the ability to absorb others' skills and knowledge if she cuts them with that dagger," I explained. "In other words, if either you or me get so much as a scratch, she'll master all of our techniques right away!"

"Are you serious??"

"It's likely… no, actually I'm pretty sure about it!"

The way she looked like proved that she can absorb abilities, and the fact that she didn't use a single spell until recently only to use one of Zonagain's now proved that she can also absorb knowledge. Bell didn't know anything about magic, after all, and I doubt Dulgofa knew how to cast Freeze Arrow.

Anyway, we really got ourselves into a hell of a situation. Winning against someone with spider legs, who has a sword skill similar to Gourry, while avoiding even the tiniest injury was pretty much impossible.

Thanks to those legs, if we tried to run away, she would quickly catch up with us. Fleeing to the sky was also not a good idea, since all she needed to do was find the corpse of one of those winged demons… and once she could fly around, our chances of beating her

would quickly hit rock bottom.

No matter how I look at it, we have to defeat her the way we are now…

"When you say that she absorbs knowledge," Aria asked from next to me, "you mean that she actually absorbs memories, right?"

"Yes, I think she does," I answered, my gaze not leaving our opponent.

"I understand… Let's settle this."

"Eh?" Hearing that, I could not help but stare at her in confusion.

Aria was smiling broadly, her face devoid of hesitation. "Please save my sister…"

I… At that moment, I didn't know what she was about to do.

Aria ran. Right towards her.

"Aria!" I reached forward to catch her, but narrowly missed. At last, I realized what she meant.

"No!" Gourry dashed forward—but it was too late. Aria was already held by several spider legs. She held her arms out, as if wishing to embrace the one in front of her.

"We will not be apart ever again… Bell…"

At that moment, the woman's dagger cut into her chest in the middle.

Without hesitation, I started to chant my spell. Stalling was

unforgivable, an insult to Aria.

Lords of the Darkness and all Four Worlds,
Following thy bonds of fate…

Aria's body softly fell to the ground. The spider legs that held her began to tremble a little.

...Merge all thy might,
Grant unto me greater power!

The four talismans on my belt, neck and both wrists lit up with a dim light.

The woman's body was shaking… it was like she was crying.

I paid it no mind, but walked towards her while chanting the second incantation.

Fragment of the Lord of Nightmares,
Release thy heavenly retribution
Blade of cold, black nothingness…

"Hey, Lina!" Gourry called out to me from behind.

He already realized: the bloodlust completely evaporated from the woman's figure.

Become my power, become my body
Together, let us walk the path of destructionAnd smash even the souls of the Gods—

I stood exactly in front of her as I finished my spell.

In a low voice, I uttered the Power Words while bringing my

right hand forward,

"Ragna Blade."

The darkness sprang forth from my right hand… and sliced into her without resistance.

The moon was rising.

I stared at the town that lay under the dark sky in silence.

"…Are you crying…?"

"…Don't be stupid…" I answered to Gourry with a small smile while glancing at him over my shoulder.

We were walking along a road that went from Cairus' mansion alongside one of the canals. I could not sense a single living soul in the Crimson Town that was wrapped in darkness.

"It's just… I have… too much on my mind, a bit…" Turning my eyes back to the city, I mumbled in a low voice.

"…Can I ask you about something?" he spoke up once more.

"…What is it?"

"Why did she stop moving so suddenly back then?"

"Aria… she paralyzed her," I answered. "Using her ability to absorb the memory of her victims… she conveyed her feelings about Ms. Bell to her…"

Maybe, at that moment, Bell finally understood and accepted her. The hatred she had possessed seemed to disappear from her mind—the same hatred and obsession that allowed her and Dulgofa

to merge. A rift was torn between the two; if we didn't interfere, Dulgofa probably would've taken over Ms. Bell against her will, so I… really had no choice about it all.

I did not want… Aria's sacrifice to save her sister's mind to be in vain.

But still…

"Lina…" Gourry drew closer to me and put his hand on my head. "Don't be sad… Whatever is on your mind, you can share that burden with me."

"Gourry…" I rested my arm on his shoulder… right before I put it around his neck, and started to strangle him. "Of course you have to do that! Do you think I'd just stand idly by if you'd tell me 'sorry, not my problem'?! I would choke the life out of you!"

"But… khh… you're already choking me!"

"If I had told you in advance, you would've resisted!"

"Of course I would have! …Well, you seem to be feeling better now, at least."

"I am… Being depressed won't change anything, anyway."

"Oh, okay, I get it." Gourry let the subject drop. "Things are over here, anyway, and that sword is gone too."

He said that with a honest smile, but the smile I could offer in return was less genuine.

True… after she was cut by the blade of darkness, the woman disappeared, crumbling into black dust. Perhaps Dulgofa met the

same fate too.

However…

As long as Dynast's general is alive, that sword will be reborn.

What was Sherra thinking when she gave that weapon to Bell? What are the mazoku planning?

The answer wasn't in my grasp yet.

I kept staring at the moon as it hang over the eastern horizon. The night had only just began…

Afterword

K: Hajime Kanzaka, **L:** Lord of Nightmares, **S:** Shabranigdu (“Subordinate S”)

K: You’ve been waiting for so long, but here it is: the 11th Slayers novel, ‘Crimson Obsession’!

L: Oooh! You dragged your feet when working on “Evil Devices in Solaria”, but you finished without delay this time. What a surprise!

K: Ha! You fool! The manuscript was late this time around too! The people around me had to work extra hard and still only barely managed to publish it on time!

L: You will get some serious beatings from people if you keep doing that.

K: That would be a little harsh… Well, actually, I was too busy…

L: Indeed, the TV animation has been released.

K: And lots of other things happened too as well…

L: Speaking of the anime, the profile of that blond woman which shows up in the opening for a second is me, right?

K: Ah, no, something as pitiful-looking as that can’t be you— Err, I mean, sorry, it’s nothing. (*is terrified because of her expression*)

L: Heh, good. Anyway, since the TV animation will go all the way up to the 8th original novel, my appearance is as good as assured!

K: All three **L**-fans in the country will be thrilled.

L: What are you talking about, three?! I have a lot more fans in the country than that!!

K: And although you will appear, you’ll still look like Lina, no?

L: Well… That is true, but…

K: Haha, if you'll look like that, you won't be any higher than 7th place if we hold another popularity contest.

L: Wu-whaaaat?!… By the way, does that mean the method to use for the popularity contest has been determined?

S: Ladies and Gentlemen! You've been waiting for long, but now, I can finally announce the voting method of "The Third Slayers Popularity Co—"

K: What are you doing? It hasn't been decided yet!

S: Huh?

K: I said it wasn't decided yet. There was no point to dressing up in that tuxedo and holding that microphone.

S: …But… you almost said just now that the method of the popularity vote was….

L: Yeah-yeah, but the point was that it's *still* not done! You can't come barging in as you please, get out of here this instant!

S: *sniff-sniff* (S exits the stage sniffing, looking a bit down.)

K: Hmm, he seems somewhat depressed. Come to think of it, **S** doesn't appear in the afterwords nowadays except for the popularity contests.

L: Don't be lenient on him! The world is a cold, ruthless place. Putting this **S**'s situation aside…

K: You really said '*this* **S**'…?

L: So the method of the popularity contest is still up in the air, right?

K: Hmm, people have sent some ideas, but… most of them follow the same typical pattern that doesn't consider the effort it'll take to count the votes. There are a lot a more than one or two votes

involved here, more like several hundred or even several thousand…

L: It's impossible to count votes that take the form of drawings or written sentences.

K: So we are still waiting on a good idea for the popularity contest! This time, I also want to include characters that aren't in the novels, but appear in the anime series or movies.

L: Right, so now fishmen and winged demons can take the top as well.

K: What kind of people would vote for them?

L: I just said it's a possibility. Like the last time, it'll probably be a fight of the quartet of Lina, Gourry, Zelgadiss and Xelloss… That reminds me, Gourry really stood out in this 11th volume compared to the previous ones!

K: Yes! It surprised me as well, even though I wrote it.

L: Hey… Normally a writer doesn't say things like that…

K: After he lost the Sword of Light, he wasn't very active in the 9th and 10th volumes.

L: He really wasn't. I could barely notice him at all.

K: From now on, I want to have him more actively involved.

L: How about making *me* more actively involved in the afterwords instead? Or writing a novel where I'm the heroine.

K: Write a novel about a girl who can obliterate any obstacle in her path? Yeah, right! Although, when said like this, some people might ask me how is that any different from Slayers…

S: Then how about "The Poor Abused Subordinate S" or "Subordinate S Beats L Up"?

L: I told you not to just pop in like that!!!

(*the sound of several punches*)

L: That seal in the Kataart Mountains must be very weak… If you dare to show up again without permission, I'll put you into concrete and throw you into the river!

K: W-Wha… How can you say something like that?.. Well anyway, please allow me to announce the popularity contest when the voting method is finally determined.

L: And with that, this afterword comes to a close.